

Violence

Violence maims, kills, instills fear and dehumanises us. At the moment the major epidemic of violence in South Africa is patently visible due to its acute on chronic political component.

Mostly, those of us who deal with the victims get on with the job and give no thought to dealing with the epidemic itself. The MRC has a division to study Trauma. The choice of this word as opposed to violence might also reflect the medical profession's reluctance to deal fundamentally with the issues around violence.

David Muchart, a Scottish surgeon teaching at the University of Natal opened my eyes to our ostrich mentality. Speaking at a recent medical student conference at the Natal Medical School he very clearly illustrated what the effect of violence was. It gives us more work, medically speaking, than most other problems we have to deal with. The population suffers a level of morbidity and mortality on a par with such major problems as cancer and coronary artery disease. The major difference being that this happens at a much younger age. Any prevention or effective rehabilitation of the victims of violence therefore has a vastly better payoff in terms of life expectancy.

Paul Tournier writes about the 'Violence Inside', the violence or aggression inherent in our personalities and societal structures. To decrease our culture of violence we really need to address fundamental issues in ourselves, our upbringing and in the way we organise our public life. To decrease the effects of trauma we need to recognise the hidden cases of child

abuse especially and deal more rapidly with the more obviously traumatised. Life is saved by effective action in the early golden period and rehabilitation is also enhanced by it.

We need fundamental research in the area of violence in the line of the Wits group¹. We need further reach with our ambulance services and, at most institutions, a vastly improved and purposeful trauma service.

As General Practitioners, we are there where all this is happening. We have some influence on child rearing and the dynamics in families. We are likely to see the first warning signs of child or wife abuse and often initiate care with accidents or other forms of violence. We also need to stop ignoring violence individually and corporately and give it the kind of attention that we are giving cancer and heart disease.

Reference

1. McKendrick B, Hoffman W. Ed. People and Violence in South Africa. Cape Town: OUP. 1990.

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