Personal View

I was reminded of Pasternak's phrase, "Man is a wolf to man" at a recent World Psychiatric Association symposium where one session was devoted to the victims of torture. The meeting was in Copenhagen, where the Danish Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims under the neurologist, Dr Inge Kemp Genefke, has taken the initiative on this subject and has encouraged other countries to establish similar centres.

During the past decade Denmark has received its share of refugees, many of them victims of torture. They have received satisfactory medical treatment, but it has not been so easy to provide the psychological and physical help that they need. Are they patients? Sometimes they are, but mostly they are not. They are human beings reacting as best they can—according to what they have learnt is normal life—to abnormal and hideous events. They fall between two stools.

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We learnt at the symposium that torture was becoming more sophisticated. More elaborate psychological threats have been added to the primitive sadistic aspect. Instead of breaking bones, which might be used as evidence in a court trial, electric shock treatment is applied to the genitals. This leaves no scar but damages the victim's sexual performance. Or the victims are told, "We are not going to tell where you are, where you have been, or where you are going. . . . We shall evaporate you until you are non-existent."

The first speaker was June Paguduan-Lopez, a consultant psychiatrist, who had started centres for torture victims in Manila under the Marcos régime. Not surprisingly, the end of the dictatorship had uncovered many victims who had not already dared to seek help. Important lessons can be learnt from the Philippines. When political pressure increased the victims reduced their contact with the clinic, which made the therapists feel guilty and inadequate.

An Argentinian psychiatrist explained that by their "disappearance" technique the oppressors in his country had managed to shift the guilt to the families of the victims. In a country with traditional authoritarian family structures the father was especially prone to suffer, assuming the role of the deputy victim—that is, it was his fault that the son had disappeared because he, the father, had not taken enough care of the family. Only devils could construct such a universe. The stress on the fathers led to excessive morbidity from cardiovascular and even malignant diseases. So it was the mothers—the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo—who had had to fight and had done so successfully.

Dr Martirena of Uruguay and Dr Francisco Rivas Larrain of Chile discussed the worrying scenario of how medical doctors were participating in the torture of people by accepting the role of medical examiner before, during, and after the incidents of torture. The message from Uruguay was pessimistic even though dictatorship had ended because action against guilty doctors was slow or non-existent. It was also discouraging to hear how many military doctors had agreed to participate either actively or passively. On the other hand, it was reassuring that the ethical standards of the Chilean Medical College had been resurrected at a time of continuing dictatorship. Chilean doctors are tried by college courts and ousted if found guilty.

Two of the representatives of the Danish Rehabilitation Centre, Dr Inge Lunde and Dr Jørgen Ortmann, outlined some of the principles that the centre had worked out:

Treatment has to be physical as well as mental, with physiotherapy as an important element of the physical treatment.

The physical treatment and the psychotherapy have to run in parallel with each other.

Procedures that remind the person of the torture that he was exposed to ought to be avoided as far as possible.

The treatment has to include not only the individual victim but also his entire family.

The social conditions have to be included, and social counselling ought to form part of the treatment.

A Danish member of parliament and the legal counsel to the rehabilitation centre, Mr Ole Espersen, asked why the victims and not the torturers attracted the greater amount of interest. There were three reasons. Firstly, the torturers were most often acting on behalf of the authorities and were, therefore, protected. Ordinary criminals were acting against the authorities and were prosecuted. Secondly, torture was practised behind closed doors and arranged to prevent the victims from finding out the identity of a torturer. Thirdly, the victims were frightened and weakened and often they did not want to have any further contact with the authorities and especially not the police authorities.

The United Nations convention against torture, which has not yet come into force, will lay on those states that ratify it an obligation to investigate alleged acts of torture and to punish torturers. Article 10 states: "Each state shall ensure that education and information regarding their prohibition against torture are fully included in the training of law enforcement personnel, be they civilian or military."

Mr Espersen urged the judicial and the medical professions not only to help torture victims but also to speak up against torture.

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The fact that most speakers came from South America does not mean that torture is only a South American problem. Amnesty International has shown that torture takes place in some 40 countries. Rather South America and the Philippines represent the tip of the iceberg. Where were the speakers from the Middle East and Afghanistan? Is it a fact that torture is declining in South America, with Argentina and Uruguay on the stony path to democracy, but increasing in other parts of the world where the medical profession and the humanitarian organisations are much weaker and where barriers against international communication are much stronger?

The Copenhagen symposium was an example of how to influence the public and the politicians. While it was meeting Dr Francisco Rivas, who was due to speak, was released from jail in Chile because of international pressure by Amnesty International, the World Psychiatric Association, and others, but he was not allowed to join us.

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