Urmila syndrome in the Navy

MJAFI 2012;68:93

Dear Editor,

I read with extreme interest the article 'The woes of waiting wives: psychosocial battle at home front' published in *MJAFI* in January 2011 (*MJAFI* 2011;67:58–63). The authors have well delineated the stressors among the wives in the various phases of separation. The stress reactions and the coping patterns are also elucidated in great detail. However, the patterns of stressors, stress reactions, coping patterns have certain nuances in the naval scenario, which make it significantly different from those described by the authors. Consequently, the prevention and interventions to decrease the stress faced by the family of naval personnel also has to be on a different pitch. The important differences in the naval environment are as follows:

1. *Metropolitan nature of naval stations.* Almost all naval station are family stations and most of them are in metropolitan areas. Further, majority of the sailors are entitled to keep their families in these urbanised areas often on the face of severe shortage of government provided accommodation. Hence, a large proportion of naval families are staying away from their traditional support structures of joint families in unfamiliar cosmopolitan urban areas making them more vulnerable to stressors caused due to separation. Also, the operational naval units (ships) and the support units co-exist in the same geographical locality. This makes for a heterogeneous population of families, some of whom prone to frequent separation (those serving on ships) and others quite immune to the separation (those posted on shore units). This makes it difficult for 'frequent and early contact with other families coping with similar circumstances'. In fact, it often leads to lack of empathy among neighbours whose chances of facing similar stress due to separation are non-existent.
2. *Peculiarities of naval operations.* Naval operations are uncertain by their very nature. This uncertainty is compounded

by a total lack of communication during the period of separation as neither telephone nor letters are available at the families/sailors disposal during prolonged sailings. Further, the requirement of such operations is even less understood by the civilian population and the families than comparable deployments of Army and the Air Force. This creates a scenario of complete ambiguity and vagueness in all the phases described by the authors, namely pre-separation, separation, re-union, and echoes. The families are completely in the dark about the timing of separation, its duration, and its frequency.

In conclusion, the beautiful analogy given by the authors regarding relatives waiting for their kith and kin at an international airport becomes completely nightmare in the following manner: The ambience of the 'waiting area' (i.e. accommodation) is alien perhaps sharing with another sailors family who are not facing similar crises. There are no facilities for any announcements or display regarding the aircraft. In fact the take-off and landing of the aircraft (i.e. timing and frequency of deployments) is completely unknown. There is no chance of information in case of inadvertent delay or postponement/change of schedule of flight. There is a fair chance that misplaced baggage would be completely unaccounted for!

These issues need detailed analysis and study particularly in the naval scenario for developing appropriate preventive and interventional methodologies.

Contributed by

Surg Lt Cdr Rohit Verma*

*Graded Specialist (Marine Medicine) &
Principal Medical Officer,
INS Nireekshak, C/o Fleet Mail Office,
Kochi – 682004, Kerala.