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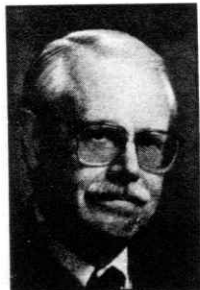
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Viewpoints

Commentaries

Psychiatry Ignoring Child Abuse and Neglect Movement

By Lee Crandall Park, M.D.



American psychiatry must move quickly, strongly, and very visibly into the rapidly expanding field of child abuse and neglect.

Although the environment of the child is a major variable in mental health and mental illness, psychiatry surprisingly is not considered particularly relevant to the child abuse and neglect movement. While the subject has captured the attention of many professional and governmental organizations, American Psychiatric Association representation almost invariably is missing from boards, committees, and study groups spearheading the movement.

The National Child Abuse Coalition, for instance, which includes members from the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, the National Academy of Pediatrics, as well as the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association, has no APA representative.

The Department of Health and Human Services Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect also lacks psychiatrists as members or consultants.

Not only are psychiatrists often relegated to the background in child abuse and neglect programs, but they sometimes are singled out as being out of step or even harmful to patients. Perhaps the most significant recent example is found in the article "Incest: A Chilling Report" in the February issue of *Leads*.

Author Heidi Vanderbilt describes the popular view that Freud abandoned his original theory that mental illness resulted from childhood sexual abuse after it was attacked by his colleagues. "He retracts

the seduction theory. The accounts of incest, he now says, were fabricated by hysterical women who were not assaulted," Vanderbilt writes.

Based on Freud's Oedipal theory, she says, "Our doctors, analysts, and judges have been taught to mistake victim for offender." When she does talk about new forms of therapy, she credits feminists and nonprofessionals as the leaders.

A disturbing trend is emerging. While quality of parenting is seen by more and more people as the key factor in psychological development, psychiatry is regarded as backward and resistant to believing the patient's report of childhood experiences. The public, government entities, and other professional groups see psychiatrists as apathetic and not particularly knowledgeable about the topic.

A major movement, having profound significance for the etiology and treatment of mental illness, is passing us by. This is happening even though the child abuse and neglect movement is placing increasing emphasis on "emotional" and "verbal" abuse, such as absence of love, intimidation, chronic verbal assault, and humiliation. And yet psychiatrists such as Heinz Kohut, John Bowlby, and Donald Winnicott are the pioneers in observing that such abuse of a child's need for healthy attachment is a necessary condition for most adolescent and adult psychopathologies.

"Whatever influence variations in genetic endowment may exert on personality development and psychopathology, an immense influence is unquestionably exerted by environmental variables," Bowlby wrote, among other places, in a January 1988 article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*.

I recommend, first, that APA move quickly to develop a comprehensive picture of the child abuse and neglect move-

ment and to participate in pertinent investigative and research programs.

There is even a major electronic data base called "Child Abuse and Neglect and Family Violence" within the Dialog computer service compiled by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect.

Second, it is important to identify and approach respected individuals in the public eye who have been involved in the child abuse and neglect movement and who might appreciate the interest and support of psychiatrists. One example, though granted it's a partisan one, is Hillary Clinton, who has expressed a strong interest in children's rights and whose husband is the Democratic nominee for president.

Finally, APA should consider making a statement in support of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20, 1989. This treaty sets standards in areas such as adoption; child labor; child physical, mental, and sexual abuse; and child neglect.

By the end of last year, more than 190 nations had signed the treaty, and 96 had completed ratification or accession. Supporters include the American Bar Association and Amnesty International. However, the United States has neither signed nor ratified it.

I cannot emphasize enough how urgent it is that psychiatrists and APA become fully involved in the child abuse and neglect movement. Our failure to do so has been seen by many as evidence that psychiatrists are unempathic, ignorant, or even dangerous to victims of abuse and neglect. Let's not let this misperception grow.

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