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THE MESSAGE

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INTRODUCTION

OUR BATTLE AGAINST child abuse reminds me of another great battle waged earlier in this century—The Battle of Britain. Just as we face overwhelming odds and fight against an evil foe today, so did Britain in the first years of World War II. But they survived and achieved victory, thanks in no small part to their brave leader, Winston Churchill. I would like to share with you three Churchill-like epigrammatic ideas to keep in mind as we discuss and search for ways to achieve victory over our enemy of child maltreatment.

Churchill rallied a dominant, island-bound people to survive the fiercest military attack in history by promising them nothing but “blood, sweat, and tears . . . and eventual victory.” For this effort of ours, I would like to delete the blood. We cannot end a form of violence by advocating violence. In fact, ending violence against children may need to be connected to the broader efforts to end violence overall. I’m sure that this idea about ending violence is unoriginal. One of its better-known advocates spoke about it 2,000 years ago, and others have reiterated it more recently. We celebrate the birthdays of these thinkers, but we don’t pay much attention to what they said.

Ideas about shunning violence have never been stated by a president, a prime minister, a king or a dictator. So persons with significant political power rarely support the idea. Perhaps the idea to shun violence must permeate our society from the bottom up rather than from the top down. We also should remember that all-important social change is effected by sets of determined persons who can sustain efforts over long periods of time. In the case of child abuse, we may need another century.

To be effective, we require keepers of a plan who will devote many decades of their lives to the effort. The keepers will keep the message alive. It will take sweat and tears. These keepers must recruit successors with similar dedication. Who, among you, are the keepers? Who will be willing to step forward and work tirelessly to keep the message alive?

Therefore, remember these lessons that I have observed in my career—shun violence, build from the bottom up, designate responsible parties, keep the faith, and support and sustain keepers of a plan to eliminate child abuse. It will take some time over multiple decades. It will take sweat and tears. However, it can and will be done—we will reach the eventual victory!

BACKGROUND

Illuminate the First Steps on the Pathway

The idea that violence against children could and should be markedly reduced is relatively new. No one gave much thought to this idea prior to the 19th century, and it has only been seriously

considered in the 20th. Given that this endeavor is unusual, it is not surprising that the pathway that needs to be traveled is not well marked. As we approach the first steps, we must try to shed some light into a dark area.

Define the Problem

Serious physical abuse and sexual abuse have statutory definitions, but still lack definitions that meet the needs of science or public health. Other recognized forms of maltreatment such as neglect and emotional abuse also require extensive definitional work.

These definitional tasks need to be accomplished if the effort is to have credibility. At present, the amount of child maltreatment is defined by the number of reports received by public social services agencies at state and county levels (US D.H.H.S., 1996), and the process lacks rigor. The need for better definitions and classification has been addressed (National Research Council, 1993), but the necessary governmental response to meet this need has not been forthcoming.

Child maltreatment appears to be closely linked to other forms of family violence such as violence against intimate partners. We need to develop unifying theories and practices for families with multiple problems. The movement to eliminate child maltreatment needs to be linked to efforts dealing with other (and possibly causative) violent problems. This will affect definitions and classification.

In addition to good and consistent definitions, there is a serious need for instrumentation that will allow more consistent recognition and quantitative analysis of a problem that has primarily occurred in private, concealed settings.

What sort of a problem is child maltreatment? Child maltreatment is a problem created by rising cultural standards of child health and welfare. All of the behaviors encompassed by the term have existed as long as records can be found describing children's lives (deMause, 1974). The 19th and 20th centuries produced observers and thinkers who defined certain actions affecting children as intolerable where, in prior centuries they were regarded as normal and acceptable, if sometimes regrettable. While the positions taken by the thinkers often became the "stated" or even the "believed" standards of societies, the same societies tolerated or overlooked the behaviors regarded as intolerable. Thus hiding, denying, and ignoring the problem is built into most contemporary cultures.

A divergence of views persists about what needs to be done, which reflects a variance in the mental constructs of child maltreatment. While some see the problem as an aberrant behavior that might be suppressed by laws, others see it as a virtually inevitable consequence of adverse circumstances (especially poverty) in which some families exist through no fault of their own. These two are not the only ways in which the problem is conceptualized.

Views also legitimately diverge on how best to utilize resources in dealing with the problem. Proposed remedies include (among many others) stiffer penalties for persons who abuse, better treatment of abused persons to interrupt a perceived generational cycle, and greatly enhanced supports for families, which might primarily prevent maltreatment.

How big is it? The size of the problem will be determined by the definitions that are adopted, however, even if very conservative definitions are adopted which include very serious cases with major health effects, the problem is very large. Prevalence estimates for sexual abuse based on surveys indicate that 20% of women and 10% of men were sexually abused during childhood. Physical abuse sufficient to produce significant emotional damage is probably comparable. Neglect is more frequently reported than any other maltreatment form and is developmentally devastating for infants and young children.

How long could it take? Because the problem is large and widespread, and because the behaviors have been in place for millennia, it would be unwise to predict that a significant reduction of the

burden could be accomplished in much less than a century. However, once a rational and unified approach is in place, it may be possible to make a more accurate estimate of the time required to reduce the burden to tolerable levels.

Whose Job Is It?

Since the 1960s, a large number of differing responses to child maltreatment have been put in place, mostly through Justice and Social Services approaches. In general, these approaches seem to have made the problem more visible and quantifiable, but they do not appear to have reduced it except in unusual and (usually) experimental circumstances.

Because child maltreatment has a number of different forms, and the various forms are all complex behaviors affected by many factors, it is likely that a number of approaches will be necessary and that simplistic solutions will fail.

The Approaches from Health, Justice, and Welfare

The relative success of the problem-oriented efforts to deal with cancer, heart disease, and other major scourges suggest that similar approaches might work in reducing the burden of child maltreatment. However, this type of approach may only work when carried out by health professionals. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (CAPTA) created a governmental agency with a child abuse focus, the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN). The entity was placed in the Office of Human Development Services, which replaced the “Welfare” component of the Department of Health Education and Welfare. Twenty years later, this entity has been reduced in size and funding to virtual invisibility.

The reasons for the abandonment of NCCAN are complex, but an important one was the lack of a popular and professional constituency. To some degree, this may be due to an inability to demonstrate success due, in turn, to an absence of rigorous epidemiological measurement tools for quantifying child maltreatment. Another major factor clearly was the welfare reform movement.

A greater contribution from both the personal and public health sectors might produce a more sustainable and focused effort. Personal health providers of both physical and mental health services devote significant energy to such efforts now. Serious physical abuse cases populate the intensive care units of children’s hospitals, and children and adults with serious mental health problems produced by child maltreatment crowd mental health care programs of all sorts. In general, public health departments at state and local levels have not concerned themselves with child maltreatment, possibly because of the federal decision at the time of the passage of CAPTA to give the problem to the Office of Human Development Services.

During the last 20 years a number of important initiatives dealing with child maltreatment and other family violence forms have been developed by Justice components at federal, state, and local levels. Often these initiatives supported the work of health and mental health professionals. The National Network of Child Advocacy Centers and state programs providing services to victims of crimes are two major examples. It appears that more resources for the assessment, treatment, and prevention of child maltreatment have come through the Justice Department than any other source.

A federal policy change that would assign more responsibility to Health for dealing with child maltreatment and other family violence forms appears to be an important move. However, there is no analyzed experience that indicates certainty of success.

The Multidisciplinary Approach

Multidisciplinary case work has been very useful at the local level in the management of newly-reported child abuse cases, and most communities provide some form of quick communications systems involving health, social services, and law enforcement. However, no significant

parallel process has been developed at either the state or the national level. Indeed, interagency cooperation at the federal level is generally regarded as “an unnatural act.” Still, it is difficult to see how this problem can be addressed successfully without major contributions from all concerned governmental components. A unifying concept for the governmental approach is badly needed.

A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

Stating the Goal

Leaders must write a mission statement that can be easily understood and supported by persons who have been professionally or personally involved in child maltreatment. It is likely that this statement will need to undergo several drafts as it works its way through a Delphi technique of recruiting support.

Defining Specific Objectives

Specific objectives will need to be developed, attained, discarded, and revised many times to achieve the goal.

1. Writing and rewriting the mission statement
2. Inventing, designing and constructing the vehicle

A movement that intends to significantly reduce child maltreatment must be sustained over a long period of time, and must have substantial backing. The idea is not new—Prevent Child Abuse American (formerly the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse) has been engaged in this process for 3 decades. However, this important effort needs a new entity to develop a modern strategy.

The first version of the vehicle need not wait for the development of a complete professional consensus on exactly what needs to be done, but it must work to achieve this consensus as quickly as possible.

The needed vehicle must have durability as its most important feature. It will also require a large payload capacity. Speed may be less important, at least until a straighter and clearer road to the destination is visible. In the early, dark and rocky stages of this journey, four-wheel drive will be required.

3. Recruiting support

The supporters that came to San Diego for the opening meeting represent professional societies, governmental entities, and advocacy, educational, and research organizations. At this early stage, the most important contribution these groups can make is a clear expression of their ideas about how to move the process along. Much more is needed.

We must involve persons and organizations that have been affected by child maltreatment. In the past, they have tended to be anonymous and low profile, and have not constituted a political or intellectual force except when an occasional public official or celebrity stepped forward to describe a history of having been abused. The early attempts to build an organization for the self-help of persons who had abused children, and who wished to stop doing so, have not been sustained.

At present, a small but powerful parent's movement is developing, led by parents whose infants or children have been injured or killed while in out-of-home care. The movement includes some parents whose children were hurt by a spouse or companion. Many of these parents attended a 1998 National Shaken Baby Conference in Utah, and their presence and speaking had a profound effect on the professionals present.

The vehicle must provide space for passengers such as these and other affected parents as well as for survivors of maltreatment who wish to take part. There should be space for persons who have abused children, who have acknowledged their actions, and who wish to help others to avoid such actions.

Recruitment of support (in any of its forms) requires the development of a pyramid scheme, and estimation of critical masses for each form.

Financial: The ultimate financial requirements cannot yet be estimated. Sufficient funding must provide for the vehicle design and the recruitment of the critical mass of support. As the movement progresses, the financial requirements will steadily increase and ultimately stabilize at a level sufficient to sustain ongoing movement. We cannot predict this level with any precision, but one estimate is between 2 and 10 million dollars per year.

Intellectual: We need to gather the best thinking to tackle this public health problem, which will require tapping all relevant disciplines, in particular, people who have been affected by the problem. We should also rely on previous work such as the research agenda set forth by the National Research Council (National Research Council, 1993) that stands as a very useful guide. However, if the movement wishes to capture a “critical mental mass” in the United States, a special set of tactics needs to be developed for this purpose.

Emotional and popular: We need to convince the public and their legislators that the child maltreatment burden is something we should all care about and that we all share in the responsibility. Stories can convey this message. The best source of such stories are the persons who have been affected by child maltreatment (as described above), possibly supplemented by comments from professionals who can provide rational analyses of the events described by “real people.” Although a few good examples of such stories can be found, this work needs to be expanded logarithmically and continued over a long period of time.

4. Defining and describing the multiple constructs of the problem

Child maltreatment professionals do not speak with “one voice,” and up to the present time there is no particular reason why they should. The words of Walt Kelly (inventor of Pogo) still apply: “One man’s truth is another’s cold broccoli.” However, it is probable that a range of acceptable beliefs, based upon the best knowledge available, can be written—this must be an early task.

5. Improving definitions and establishing measurement tools

This task must be undertaken immediately and accomplished within the first year or two of the project.

6. Redesigning federal and state approaches

Work with expert governmental representatives to create a blueprint that will provide for more effective governmental efforts.

Allowing for Error

Progressing over a rocky road in darkness inevitably leads to accidents and breakdowns. Persons who become easily discouraged when an apparently promising approach fails and must be abandoned should not become engaged in this work. Time and resources must be made available and an effort must be made to avoid the development of unreasonable expectations for quick success.

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