Letters

Youth Suicide

The research on youth suicide reviewed by Constance Holden (Research News, 22 Aug., p. 839) says little about the link between childhood sexual abuse and a desire to die on the part of some young people. Clinicians are discovering that the group identified as at high risk for youthful suicide, children of a depressive mother and an alcoholic father, are most likely to have been sexually abused, usually incestuously.

The reason these children become suicidal in their late teens and early 20's is that they encounter severe difficulties in becoming independent. A child who has never felt secure and adequately cared for does not know how to become a good parent to herself or himself. These young adults become easily overwhelmed by their own feelings. They feel hopeless and blame themselves for their difficulties. They feel intense guilt and shame, sometimes without knowing why, as they often have no conscious recall of their abuses.

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse have most often felt depressed since early childhood. The depression is frequently masked, expressed only through a smiling, overly compliant manner or through acting out self-destructive behaviors such as alcohol and drug abuse, antisocial acts, and abusive sexual relationships. When their feelings cannot be contained any longer, they may resort to more immediately self-destructive behaviors, such as wrist-cutting, to try to get relief from the panic they feel. As the cycle progresses, they may feel occasional strong impulsive desires to be dead in order to stop the cycle. The psychiatric diagnostic category that should be of most interest to researchers of youthful suicide is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder rather than depression.

If the incidence of childhood sexual abuse were considered as a factor causal to youthful suicide, the whole question of why young people feel the need to abuse and kill themselves might make more sense.

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I was surprised to read Holden's statement that "Freudian psychodynamic theories" have delayed the recognition that "children are as vulnerable to depression and despair as adults." Actually psychoanalysts have been at the forefront of the study of depression in infants, older children, and adolescents, as well as in adults. Indeed Donald J. Cohen, whom Holden quotes, is himself a child and adult analyst. Robert Litman, whose important work she also cites, is a psychoanalyst. An examination of the concepts described in the article reveals that they are based on knowledge psychoanalysts have accumulated and the psychoanalytic theory that continues to develop. A few references will make it clear that analytic contributions have been of overwhelming importance.

In 1946, Rene Spitz (*1*) described anaclitic depression in infants who were deprived of their mothers or adequate substitutes. Erna Furman (*2*) detailed the importance of parent loss in the development of depression in children in 1974. Anna Freud and Burlingham (*3*) observed depressive affects in their study of children deprived of their parents during World War II. Margaret Mahler (*4*) has studied grief in infants and young children even without actual deprivation of parents. Anna Freud, in her 1958 paper on adolescence (*5*), described teenagers' depression and its dynamics. Stuart Asch, in 1971, discovered the importance of attempts to define one's boundaries in teenage girls' wrist-cutting (*6*).

The contributions of psychoanalysts are not minor by any means. They include a recognition and discovery of most of the factors described in Holden's article: psychic conflict, family turmoil, turning of aggression against the self, guilt, ego disturbances, identification with depressed parents, and defenses against depressive affect, to mention only a few.

Psychoanalysts continue their important research on depression and certainly welcome the studies of nonanalysts whom they have influenced and others.

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High-Level Nuclear Waste Disposal

As recounted by Eliot Marshall (News & Comment, 22 Aug., p. 835) and anticipated by Daniel E. Koshland, Jr.'s editorial (27 June, p. 1585), the current national plan for underground disposal of high-level nuclear waste (HLW), mainly spent fuel from civilian power reactors, is in deep trouble. Instead of HLW, the nuclear waste disposal program itself could face deep burial. But this outcome may not be all bad.

The program will either miss its mandated deadline of 1998, or else Congress may have to ride roughshod over the objections of states and communities that do not want an underground storage site within their boundaries. The site selection process is convoluted; it specifically allows for vetoes by affected states and Indian tribes—which Congress can, in principle, override.

Under the circumstances, the best solution may be to let the adversary process of site selection run its course and forget about the deadline, which is artificial anyway. I doubt whether Congress will want to or should force the issue. Any shortcuts, even if legislated, to eliminate this preprogrammed administrative-political gridlock could undermine public confidence in the whole selection procedure.

Until 10 to 20 years ago it was generally assumed that spent fuel would be reprocessed. The inert uranium-238, 95% by weight, would be sold; the fissile uranium-235, plutonium, and other transuranic elements would be incorporated into fuel elements and recycled. Only the highly radioactive fission products, less than 3% by weight, would be immobilized in glass, as is now done in France, and buried. This view changed during the Carter Administration and was replaced by the idea of deep burial of whole fuel assemblies without reprocessing. The low price of uranium was one factor, but the main reason was fear of nuclear proliferation by countries that had acquired power reactors. Most experts now regard this fear as misplaced; there are easier ways to make nuclear bombs than to use the plutonium from spent fuel.

The outcome of this change was the Nuclear Waste Policy Act, often referred to as the "Nuclear WPA" or the "Geologists' Full Employment Act of 1982." For obvious political reasons it mandates not one but two disposal sites—presumably one in the West and one in the East, with each ultimate disposal site requiring investigation of nine candidate sites.

If the site selection process now stalls, then the spent fuel will remain at the reactor sites, air-cooled and protected in "dry casks," after emerging from its 5- to 10-year stay in the existing swimming pools that provide initial cooling. Doing nothing is a reasonable interim solution: it requires little if any transportation of HLW and allows monitoring and retrieval of the spent fuel. The matter of ultimate disposal could be