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EDITORIAL

The Spousal Abuse Problem

Spousal abuse, now generating much attention in the United States, is a tragedy viewed from any perspective, but the exposure of the subject of domestic violence may help to produce appropriate action.

There is some good social science research on domestic violence, and a recent book printed by the National Academy of Sciences, *Understanding and Preventing Violence*,* gives some data on the subject. The statistics are alarming but informative. Twenty-nine percent of the women murdered in the United States in 1992 were killed by a husband, ex-husband, or suitor. The type of person who is a batterer tends to become a stalker after the breakup of the relationship, a situation in which the woman frequently concludes (correctly) that her situation can become more perilous if she tries to leave. Cultural acceptance is a contributing factor. Many cultures have an unwritten code that the husband can command and deserves to control the wife. The wife's personal fear is only one of the factors that lead many to tolerate the abuse. Economic dependence, desire to preserve the home, and concern about separation from the children add to the reasons for a woman's unwillingness to leave or to press charges even when the police intervene after an urgent call for help. There is also a generational influence: 80% of batterers were the sons of batterers who observed their fathers abusing their mothers. Women threaten and, in fact, kill their husbands or ex-husbands, but in smaller numbers and sometimes to protect themselves.

Some important legislative steps are being taken, notably in California and New Jersey, with laws that allow, even require, police to press charges if there is physical evidence—bruises and lacerations—observed in response to a call for help. That eliminates the frustration created by a "911" call with evidence of battery and an unwillingness of the injured spouse to press charges. Interventions in the form of incarceration of the offender in early stages, protective restraining orders, and family counseling also seem to be helpful in many cases. Some judges have even been unwilling, in the past, to impound the gun of a batterer. Use of electronic devices, "panic buttons" of the type prevalent in home security systems, and portable phones seem to be logical steps that are now being considered seriously.

Good social science research could be very helpful here. There are data to indicate that the batterers in upper income and educational groups respond to an appropriate punishment after the first police call. Judicial leniency at this stage is no help to the batterer or to society. There are also data indicating that psychiatric counseling is valuable to many at this early stage. Why these two approaches are helpful to some and unhelpful to others is worthy of further research. The generational transmission brings up the question of nature or nurture: Does a son who sees his mother battered conclude that it is an acceptable norm, or is he repelled but has an uncontrollable temper that overcomes logical processes? Again, good scientific data could help greatly in these areas.

Inheritance of a defective behavioral gene should not argue against legal action and psychiatric counseling, since these have been shown to be effective in many cases. Just as suicidal tendencies can be prevented in some cases by counseling and in other cases by antidepressant drugs, similar dual strategies may be needed to cope with the spousal abuse problem.

An outstanding example of the way public education and legal action can be used to solve a serious social problem has been given by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Driving while intoxicated was treated with the same societal tolerance and judicial laissez-faire as spousal abuse before MADD launched its campaign for stricter laws and greater enforcement of them. Their influence has already been felt in the form of better legal actions and a decreasing incidence of accidents and fatalities caused by drunk driving. More research needs to be done to understand the causes and preventive strategies for spousal abuse, but already enough information is available to suggest that similar public education, good use of good data, and pressure on the judicial system could be used by public interest groups (some are already acting) to change the climate and understanding of this very basic problem.

Daniel E. Koshland Jr.

* A. J. Reiss Jr. and J. A. Roth, Eds., *Understanding and Preventing Violence* (National Academy Press, Washington, DC, 1994).