



fee, rye whisky and cigarettes. He was poorly dressed and barely washed. He had a terrible headache and constant chest pains. He was suicidal.

While in no way condoning the abuse this man had inflicted on his wife, I realized that over the years no one — myself included — had offered him much help in dealing with his lack of self-esteem, alcoholism, and poor communication and home-making skills. This was an ill man at significant risk of dying.

Men of low socioeconomic status and those with drug or alcohol addiction or a family history of violence and authoritarianism are at risk of becoming abusers, and abusers are not a healthy group, experiencing higher rates of addiction, job loss, incarceration and early death.^{1,2} In the 16 years I have been in practice here, one woman has been murdered by an abusive partner, but at least 4 abusive men have committed suicide.

There are too few treatment programs for men, and fewer still are the prevention programs for children and adolescent boys. Many abusive men are capable of learning.³ They can be better partners to the women in their lives and better role models for their children. We should be actively identifying and treating the man (as well as the woman) who is, or might become, involved in an abusive relationship. It might just save his life.

Shelagh McRae, MD

Gore Bay Medical Centre

Gore Bay, Ont.

Received by email

References

1. Lee WV, Weinstein SP. How far have we come? A critical review of the research on men who batter. *Recent Dev Alcohol* 1997;13:337-56.
2. Stawar TL. Suicidal and homicidal risk for respondents, petitioners, and family members in an injunction program for domestic violence. *Psychol Rep* 1996;79:553-4.
3. Mintz HA, Cornett FW. When your patient is a batterer: What you need to know

before treating perpetrators of domestic violence. *Postgrad Med* 1997;101:219-27.

[One of the authors responds:]

Dr. Rudrick's request for a "balanced view of domestic abuse" contrasts sharply with his emotional response to my editorial. Although I agree that it is important to acknowledge that men may be the victims of domestic violence perpetrated by women, violence and abuse within intimate relationships are not gender neutral. Numerous reports founded on community-based surveys and police statistics indicate that men are much more likely to inflict abuse and women are much more likely to be the victims. Yes, women in both heterosexual and lesbian relationships have been known to behave in an abusive or violent manner toward their partners, but this represents a relatively small proportion of abusive intimate relationships.

Rudrick cites US data on murders in domestic situations, but because of differences in social systems and gun laws, these data are not relevant to the Canadian situation. Domestic violence accounts for 15% of all Canadian homicide victims, the risk being greater for women (3.2 women are killed by their husbands for each man killed by his wife).¹ In 32% of cases in which a man kills his wife, he also commits suicide. Clearly, physicians need to see domestic violence as a potential health risk for both female and male patients.

Children are potential victims of these abusive relationships as well. Data from Statistics Canada² indicate that children witness 40% of the abusive incidents in their home, and these experiences have been shown to have a negative impact on the health and well-being of both male and female children and also increase the likelihood that these children will later become involved in abusive relationships.

Physicians must continue to consider the possibility that violence and abuse may influence the physical and mental health of all their patients, male and female, adult and child, while recognizing that such experiences are more common in certain subsets of their patients.

Barbara Lent, MA, MD

Victoria Family Medical Centre

London, Ont.

References

1. Wilson M, Daly M. Spousal homicide. *Juristat* 1994;14(8):1-15.
2. Statistics Canada. Violence against women survey. *The Daily* (Ottawa) 1993 Nov 18.

Overpopulation and Rwanda

May I congratulate Christopher Andrews on his perceptive and graphic comments in the article "Words cannot describe: a trip into Rwanda's heart of darkness" (*CMAJ* 1998;158[1]:84-6). More than 60 years ago, also armed with a BSc, I started nutrition surveys in South Africa. There I learned about the wider aspects of environment and nutrition.

At that time Rwanda had a population of about 1 million. It supported many wild animals and was covered by tropical forest. Today it is the most densely populated country in Africa, with about 1 hectare of cropland for every 6 people. There is still some forest left, but large amounts are being cut down each year.¹ The country also supports large numbers of domestic farm animals² and more than 5 million people in an area less than half the size of Nova Scotia.

The Germans and then the Belgians brought "development" to Rwanda in the form of tea and coffee plantations, forestry, better transportation, some education, hospitals, extra food and trade goods. However, they did not bring a family-planning program. Simple overcrowding on agricultural land has