

Taking exception

In my opinion, the apology by the Hamilton Health Sciences Centre (HHSC) does not mark a “new era” in response to medical error.¹ I knew immediately that the death of my daughter, Claire, resulted from an adverse event, but the facility initially offered no response, no condolences — nothing whatsoever. Dr. Andrew McCallum (chief of staff at HHSC) was not even aware of the death until I alerted him to it. HHSC demonstrated no intent to conduct a proper internal review or offer an apology until 6 months of relentless advocacy on my part. My question is this: Had I not been a registered nurse who clearly understood the mechanisms of Claire’s senseless death and informed HHSC of that understanding, would there have been an apology? My gut instinct says, No.

HHSC has gone only halfway in its apology, having made no effort to address the professional and personal accountability of the medical staff who were responsible for Claire’s care. Yet our family remains devastated in the wake of a staff member’s actions, which led to the death of a beautiful, profoundly loved, 11½-year-old child.

In cases such as these, I don’t think the lawyers are “winners,” as HHSC president and CEO Murray Martin has stated. The lawyers with whom I have been in contact have expressed their shock and outrage at the manner in which this child died. In fact, we all lose when one of the most valuable members of society and a representative of its future — a child — needlessly dies.

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Reference

1. Kilpatrick K. Apology marks new era in response to medical error, hospital says. *CMAJ* 2003;168(6):757.

[Editor’s note:]

Murray Martin, the president and CEO of HHSC, declined to respond.

The singles’ scene

I read with interest in the recent editorial on SARS¹ that “There are reports of single people infecting up to 112 others.”

Does this epidemiologic manifestation hold for married people as well?

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Reference

1. SARS: the struggle for containment [editorial]. *CMAJ* 2003;168(10):1229.

The politics of war

The editorial on the war in Iraq¹ is far below *CMAJ*’s usual standards and would be more suitable for the pages of a university student publication or a free weekly community newspaper. Surely a medical journal can be expected to limit its editorials to subjects at least nominally connected to the practice of medicine. Instead, your condemnation of the coalition’s war against Iraq amounts to little more than sophomoric political partisanship. More disappointing, the commentary neglects one of the basic principles of medical and scientific analysis: any criticism of an intervention, whether pharmaceutical or surgical or political, must at least acknowledge the consequences of not intervening.

Even if one accepts the utterly unverifiable, not to say baseless, claims of the Iraq Body Count Project,² a reputable medical journal must contrast

these allegations with the “body count” associated with not removing Saddam Hussein from power. Failing to make this comparison invites the conclusion that the liberation of more than 100 Iraqi children from a children’s prison³ does not matter, or that the information coming to light about Iraqi torture chambers⁴ is not relevant to the writers of the editorial.

There is no question that, tragically, civilians have been accidentally killed by coalition forces. But accepting the null hypothesis — that no intervention is preferable to this intervention — would entail believing that Hussein would have killed fewer civilians than the coalition has. The evidence that is now mounting challenges this hypothesis most strenuously. Of course, this editorial is not about evidence; it is about politics.

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References

1. The opportunity costs of war in Iraq [editorial]. *CMAJ* 2003;168(9):1101.
2. Iraq Body Count Project team. Iraq body count [Web site]. Available: iraqbodycount.net (accessed 2003 Jun 1).
3. MacQuarrie B, Nelson SB. Celebrations whirl in a capital free of regime. *Boston Globe* 2003 Apr 10;Sect A:1.
4. Price N. Finally the victims have faces. *The Hamilton Spectator* 2003 Apr 25;Sect B:4.

A recent *CMAJ* editorial¹ about the war in Iraq addresses some humanitarian concerns but fails to suggest how to deal with a repressive regime that caused the loss of a million lives during the war with Iran, gassed and killed thousands of its own citizens for alleged dissension, proved impervious to sanctions (its leaders luxuriating in palaces outfitted with gold-plated bathroom fixtures) and refused attempts to peacefully resolve the situation. While some of the unbalanced views on the war that have been presented² can be excused on the basis of youth, the absence of an