

by Dr. Ruwan M Jayatunge M.D.

The mental health of children is severely compromised by war and consequent displacement. Nations have a duty under various UN agreements to alleviate the effects of war on children's mental health.

Professor William Yule

UNICEF recently estimated that over 80% of the victims of today's Warfare is women and children. Children who are a vulnerable group have suffered severe traumatic events during the Eelam War. Children of the North as well as of the South have experienced many anxiety related conditions as a result of the 25 year armed conflict in Sri Lanka. They are traumatised children and have various behavioural problems. They are at a high risk of developing numerous psychological ailments. As Ana Freud & Burlingham stated in 1943 Children are always the most vulnerable and generally more exposed citizens in countries where declared and undeclared wars rage.

There has been many research world wide that indicate children of the war zones undergo severe psychological trauma. The research in Gaza, Rwanda, Mozambique and Cambodia reveal children who were exposed to war and atrocities are at a high risk of developing PTSD. Abdel Aziz Mousa Thabet of Gaza Community Mental Health Programme and a Senior Lecturer in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Birmingham did a study to estimate the rate of Post traumatic stress reactions in Palestinian children who experienced war traumas, and to investigate the relationship between trauma-related factors and PTSD reactions. The sample consisted of 239 children of 6 to 11 years of age. 174 children (72.8%) reported PTSD reactions of at least mild intensity, while 98 (41%) reported moderate/severe PTSD reactions.

Organized and institutionalised violence like war can affect children in many ways. The effects of traumatic events on children are even greater when that trauma is due to modern warfare. In Sri Lanka a large number of children have been exposed to war trauma. There are numerous case examples which show the occurrence of anxiety reactions among the affected children.

Little K was nine years old when she became a victim of a cross fire between the armed forces and Tamil militants in the North. She sustained a gun shot injury to her left arm. She underwent a traumatic amputation of the left hand. The doctors were compelled to perform this operation in order to save her life. After the operation she was taken to an orphanage in Mulangavil in Killinochi district. She has fear feelings, night terror, bed wetting, hyperarousal and alienation. Traumatized war-zone children like little K carry the psychological scars throughout their lives.

Children who have experienced or been exposed to war trauma may



# Children affected by Eelam War -I

have numerous symptoms including trauma based behaviour. They often have anxieties and insecurities that can cause them to perceive every aspect of the world as being unsafe and frightening. The grow up with a generalised fear and hostility which affects their future lives. Trauma is often associated with intense feelings of humiliation, self-blame, shame and guilt, which result from the sense of powerlessness and may lead to a sense of alienation and avoidance. Therefore the initial trauma could become a vicious cycle.

Following case study gives a crude assumption of the longitudinal effects of psychological trauma on children which can affect their later

lives.

Master S was 12 years old when 1983 communal riots erupted. His family was hiding in a neighbouring house to evade the mob attack. The attackers burnt their house while Master S and his kid sister were hiding under a bed in their Sinhalese neighbour's house. He could hear the shoutings of the mob and the screams of the victims. Master S had fear feelings and he thought that the mob would kill him. These fears lasted for many years as he grew older.

Following day their kind neighbour with the help of the Police took them to the refugee camp at Bambalapitiya Kadreshan Kovil . Before going to the camp Master S

had a quick glance at their house which was completely destroyed by the fire. He felt sorry for loosing his books and toys.

After spending several months in the refugee camp his father managed to get asylum in West Germany. For many years S had a nostalgic feelings of his lost books and toys also fear that a group of people would come and attack him unexpectedly.

After coming to West Germany S underwent a prolonged cultural shock and frequently felt a misfit in the Western society. He became more isolated and neglected his studies. As a teenager he became more and more hostile and frequently had conflicts with the parents. After spending 12

years in West Germany S moved to Canada and got married. But he always felt the empty space and became emotionally numbed. On some occasions he could not control his temper and engaged in domestic violence. His violent outburst resulted an injury to his wife and S was charged by the Canadian Authorities. Today he is serving a prison term.

Children who had witnessed the war trauma and atrocities can have diminished cognitive abilities. They frequently have learning difficulties at school. Some have behavioural disorders. Most of them do not receive proper psychological therapies and rehabilitation. Jensen and Shaw (Jensen PS, Shaw J: Children as victims of war) indicated that there is conflicting and controversial literature on children's reactions to war-related stress. They suggested that children's cognitive immaturity and adaptive flexibility may mitigate the anticipated stressful effects.

As the researcher Osofsky, 1995 indicates the differential response to trauma depends, in part, on the child's age and level of psychological maturity. Children vary in their reactions to traumatic events. Some suffer from fears and memories immediately after the event, which dissolve with time and emotional support. Other children are more severely affected by trauma and experience long-term problems.

Children of the war zone may exhibit regressive behaviours such as bed-wetting, thumb-sucking or fear of the dark. They may have increased difficulties separating from their parents. Also they can have attention problems and learning difficulties at school. Many of these affected children can have somatic complaints, irrational fears, sleep problems, nightmares, irritability and angry outbursts. They may appear to be depressed and more withdrawn.

Adolescent (ages 12 to 18) responses are more similar to adults and they are at increased risk for problems with substance abuse, peer problems and depression.

Child soldiers have been exposed to events beyond the normal boundaries of human experiences. This is a story of a child soldier whose pseudonym is SE .

SE was 11 years old when he was forcefully recruited as a child soldier by the LTTE. During the training period he was beaten and threatened to be killed if he did not obey the orders. Once he saw a killing of a rival member by the LTTE. Along with other children he had to take part in a number of attacks against the Sri Lankan Army. They were called the members of the Baby Brigade. The Baby Brigade was a support team for the adult fighters. They never had the opportunity of going to school after they became child soldiers. Instead of books they carried AK 47 and grenades. Their childhood had been stolen.

Part II tomorrow

## Acupuncture 'lessens pain in brain not body', scientists discover

Acupuncture works by making the brain, rather than the body, no longer experience pain, according to new research.

By Andrew Hough

Scientists who scanned the brains of volunteers as they were given the Chinese therapy found it deactivated pathways that govern pain. Complementary medicine expert Dr Hugh MacPherson, of the University of York, said: "These results provide objective scientific evidence that acupuncture has specific effects within the brain which hopefully will lead to a better understanding of how acupuncture works."

The findings, published in Brain Research, suggest acupuncture has a significant effect on specific nerve structures.

Dr MacPherson and colleagues explained when a patient receives acupuncture treatment a sensation called deqi can be obtained. Scientific analysis showed this switches off areas within the brain that are associated with the processing of pain.

Dr MacPherson said: "We carried out two tests of acupuncture on our participants, one where the needles are inserted at a shallow depth which is the practise in Japan and the other where they went in much deeper which is the Chinese tradition.

"We found 10 out of the 17 experienced 'deqi' while the others didn't, and this appeared to help in deactivating areas in the brain that are associated with pain.

"The Chinese have been using acupuncture for 2,000 years for wide

ranging illnesses but we have only touched the surface at the moment.

"We believe it can help relieve a number of conditions, including depression which we have recruited 640 people for another study where half will receive acupuncture and the others counselling."

Last summer acupuncture was recommended for the first time by the drugs watchdog NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) as a treatment option for NHS patients with lower back pain.

Guidelines now state that GPs should "consider offering a course of acupuncture comprising a maximum of ten sessions over a period of up to twelve weeks" for patients with this common condition.

Co researcher Dr Aziz Asghar, a neuroscientist at Hull York Medical School, added: "The results are fascinating. Whether such brain deactivations constitute a mechanism which underlies or contributes to the therapeutic effect of acupuncture is an intriguing possibility which requires further research."

The team is currently researching if acupuncture has the ability to successfully treat irritable bowel syndrome and depression. Previous studies have indicated the holistic treatment works on knee pain and migraines.

Dr MacPherson and colleagues say their research could help to clear the way for acupuncture to be more broadly accepted as a treatment option on the NHS for a number of medical conditions.

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The findings suggest has a significant effect on specific nerve structures.