

VENERELOGY 1320

BOOK REVIEWS

**HEALTH WORKERS AND AIDS** Research, Intervention and Current Issues  
in Burnout and Response

Lydia Bennett, David Miller and Michael Ross (eds)

Harwood Academic Publishers: Switzerland, 1995

Paperback pp 419 \$39.95 (Hardcover) \$86.95 Fine Arts Press, Roseville NSW

## VENERELOGY

### BOOK REVIEWS

#### **HEALTH WORKERS AND AIDS** Research, Intervention and Current Issues in Burnout and Response

Lydia Bennett, David Miller and Michael Ross (eds)

Harwood Academic Publishers: Switzerland, 1995

Paperback pp 419 \$39.95 (Hardcover) \$86.95 Fine Arts Press, Roseville NSW

---

This book examines the phenomenon of burnout in the context of health workers struggling with HIV/AIDS. Burnout was described in 1974 by H J Freudenberger (*J Soc Issues* 30, 159) as a generalised stress reaction involving fatigue, frustration and a crisis of self-confidence on the part of the subject. Its impact varies and its manifestations are frequently different. But its presentation in the context of HIV/AIDS should hardly cause surprise. The phenomenon is frequently referred to in published papers and in conferences devoted to HIV/AIDS and its management. Now we have a substantial text collecting the up-to-date consideration of the issue in a number of countries, principally Australia, Canada and the United States. But there are also studies of burnout in HIV/AIDS health workers in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Uganda, the United Kingdom and other countries.

Like Caesar's Gaul, the book is divided into three parts. The first tackles theoretical and methodological issues. Here there is a review of the literature to date on the impact of HIV/AIDS on health workers and a study of the measurement of the impact and identification of burnout symptoms.

The second section deals with current research on health workers in a number of studies in four continents. This descriptive section identifies the problems and collects a number of the interventions that have been tried to assist

the responses of health care professionals in tackling their own stress in the face of HIV/AIDS management.

The third section of the book deals with a number of special issues. It collects various responses to HIV management. There is a closing chapter on ethics, law and human rights written by Dr Norbert Gilmour and Professor Margaret Somerville, the latter an Australian, each of whom teaches at the famous Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law at McGill University in Canada. The book opens with a typically sensitive and insightful Foreword by Professor Jonathan Mann, now of the Harvard School of Public Health and formerly Director of the Global Programme on AIDS of the World Health Organisation. It concludes with a summary and suggestions for future research written by the three editors. This last chapter (ch 22) is a very useful drawing together of the threads and a suggestion of some of the lessons that are to be learned in the 414 pages of the text.

Speaking or writing about stress has not, until recently, been a usual feature of professional people, at least in most Anglophone countries. Doing so was thought to reveal one's own vulnerability - something that could not be tolerated in a professional person. Such insights of personality weakness or fragility of temperament were thought to be upsetting to the patient or client and disturbing to professional colleagues, particularly subordinates. The reviewer discovered this at a Canadian Judges' Conference when he decided to deliver a luncheon address on the subject of judicial stress. It caused a great deal of stress to the judicial listeners. But the subject has been persisted with and new barristers addressed on the need to recognise the stressful nature of their occupation and to learn the techniques of managing, or at least coping with, stress in their daily work. Similarly, with judges training courses on the issues of judicial stress are now emerging. So professional stress, in all occupations, is coming out of the closet. Acknowledging the issue is part of the solution to the

problem. This is one of the major advantages of this text for which the authors must be congratulated.

The causes of burnout in the treatment of patients with HIV/AIDS are collected in a useful and accurate way in the chapters of this book. There is no attempt that I could see to avoid reality in the name of political correctness.

The first cause of stress in health workers engaged in this context can be traced to fear. Initially the fear arose from perceived dangers of contagion. This is not unusual in epidemics and entirely unsurprising in a pandemic of the size of HIV/AIDS. But now that it is realised that risks of cross-infection amongst health workers are quite small, if proper precautions are taken, other sources of fear remain. They include fear arising from antipathy on the part of some health workers and their families to the particular groups from which most of the patients with HIV/AIDS, at least in Australia, Canada and the United States, present. It is unsurprising that some of the research should reveal that health workers reflect the patterns of attitudes and prejudices in the general community. There are homophobes amongst highly trained medical practitioners. People in all branches of the health care professions frequently manifest fear of, and antipathy towards, injecting drug users. Facing up to these phenomena and confronting and overcoming them is one of the lessons of this book.

Fear can also arise from the distressing, even disturbing, nature of some of the physical manifestations of HIV/AIDS. The disfiguring features of some Kaposi's sarcoma can produce feelings of revulsion with which the health worker must come to terms. To the ordinary sources of stress in the health care situation must be added the dimension of anger which this condition produces in patients, families, lovers and friends as they confront the assaults on the bodies and minds of the mostly young people involved.

To fear and anger must be added the stresses of embarrassment. A number of the studies recorded here reveal the negativity of feeling of health workers towards homosexual and bisexual patients and drug users. In part this

presents a problem which is recognised by health workers themselves who resent their own reactions and are obliged, quite frequently, to suppress them for professional reasons. This produces a build up of tensions for which there are few outlets. Operating in a context of much anger, it is small surprise that burnout is frequently the result.

The sources of anger in the face of HIV/AIDS are well analysed in several chapters of this book. They include the anger of young lovers and friends who feel survivors' guilt or who know that they must shortly take the same journey which they are witnessing. They include the anger of lovers who, years before expectation, are committed to basic tasks of voluntary care. The book deals not only with professional health carers but also with the many volunteers who have come forward to help those living, and dying with HIV/AIDS. There are also the sources of anger arising from discrimination. The tensions between families who must come to terms with serious illness at the time they discover features of the lifestyle of their dying family member of which they were formerly ignorant. All of this puts pressure upon health workers called upon to operate in the HIV/AIDS environment. Another source of stress is the inexperience of many who suddenly find the burdens of helping AIDS patients thrust upon them. And to all of these problems must be added the difficulties of budgeting and managing health facilities suddenly called upon to respond to a major epidemic. HIV/AIDS is a very costly condition to manage and treat. It puts enormous demands upon heroic medicine. These demands are usually accepted and borne with grace. But they have their impact as the anecdotal and scientific evidence collected in this book describes.

An important feature of the book is that, like any good text on HIV/AIDS, it concentrates on empirical data rather than hunch and speculation. For example, one chapter by Dieter Kleiber (Berlin) suggests that German studies reveal that there is actually less burnout among health workers in the field of HIV/AIDS than among those working with cancer patients or with geriatrics. It

is perhaps understandable to expect that HIV/AIDS will cause greater stresses and burnout. But it is useful to get the results of data from comparative studies. The penetration of HIV/AIDS in differing communities is also analysed for it obviously reflects the urgency and size of the tasks faced by health workers. The book describes the magnificent work done by volunteers in a number of countries. But whereas volunteerism was always a major feature of civic life in the United States of America, in countries such as Australia and New Zealand, for a hundred years, it had been usual to look to government to provide basic health care. A principal utility of the book is the strong concentration on social research in lieu of anecdotal studies.

An important section of the book concentrates on what can be done to respond to the dangers of unacceptable stress and burnout in health workers. There are the usual suggestions - better education, particularly for primary health workers, nurses, GPs, social workers, etc. The spread of more knowledge about risk management and the avoidance of cross-infection to remove, at least, that source of stress. The sharing of strategies that provide respite and relief is mentioned. Many lessons are being learned in health care of patients with HIV/AIDS. Often the intellectual challenge in confronting and overcoming rare opportunistic infection calls for great skill, knowledge and imagination. In the end, HIV/AIDS may take its toll. But on the way, there are, as disclosed in the pages of this text, very many opportunities for sustaining interventions by health workers which show their professions operating at their best.

Several of the closing chapters describe the ways in which budgets must be managed and the system operated to get the best results from health care at a time when HIV/AIDS puts great pressure upon already strained finances. The launch of this book in Sydney coincided with an announcement that St Vincent's Hospital, which had pioneered the treatment of the early cases of HIV/AIDS in Australia was facing a crisis in staff and clinical services that would require cutbacks in nursing positions and budgets at the very time that needs are actually

increasing. Rationalisation of hospital services in Victoria, Australia, has also threatened the specialist, concentrated resources at the Fairfield Hospital in Melbourne. So to the pressures arising from the nature of the condition and of the majority of patients presenting with it, must now be added the unfortunate uncertainty of hospital facilities and of stable employment for health workers in this field. In other countries surveyed in the book, the financial strains are even greater and the resources more limited. In Uganda and many of the countries of South America, heroic health care and expensive drugs are simply unavailable.

It is in these circumstances that the comment made by Jonathan Mann in his Foreword is most telling. A special source of stress amongst health workers in the field of HIV/AIDS arises from the absence of a simple cure for the condition. During this century, and particularly in the last forty years, health workers have become accustomed to providing the therapy or technology that can arrest illnesses or at least control many of their manifestations. HIV/AIDS returns health workers to the position prior to the modern era of drug therapy and technology. This does not make it easier for the health worker, suddenly revealed as lacking the miraculous powers which we and they had come to expect. But Dr Mann teaches that this realisation should be accepted. It should take the health worker back to the earlier skills of health care:

*"Once, before the relatively recent and in many ways successful assaults on infectious diseases, medicine was less involved with notions of 'cure' and more preoccupied with the need to reduce suffering and to accompany the ill or disabled person. Thus, among the strongest values of medicine is the affirmation that the physician will never abandon the patient, even when cure or palliation are no longer possible. The human act of accompanying, the refusal to abandon are deeply rooted parts of the ethic of health care as (or more) applicable to nursing, social work and other participants in modern health care, as to medicine."*

Rediscovering the fundamentals of health care and giving new meaning to those words is the overall impression left by this book. The very revelation of the intolerable pressures and all too frequent burnout occasioned by HIV/AIDS presents health workers as deserving more of our admiration, appreciation and praise. Everyone who has had anything to do with HIV/AIDS, at whatever level, must honour those who take the journey with people living with HIV/AIDS and accompany them, their loved ones and families, through the triumphs and tragedies. Again, Jonathan Mann puts it best:

*"... With analogy to the proverb which says that 'God gives burdens, but also shoulders', our world has plagues, but also leaders, heroes and heroines who define their heroism in the most basic way: 'I was just doing my job'. That is what this book is about."*

The book deserves to be widely read. Amongst its most useful pages are those which suggest appropriate means of coping with stress and practical ideas for avoiding burnout. Given that the epidemic is still in its earliest days, it is essential that those concerned in the overall response to HIV/AIDS should take note of the lessons of this book.

M D KIRBY\*, SYDNEY  
SEPTEMBER 1995

---

Justice Michael Kirby. Formerly Member of the WHO Global Commission on AIDS.  
Chairman of the Executive Committee of the International Commission of Jurists.