

Drugs supplies are so low that Iraqis hospitalized for illnesses as serious as cancer are asked to track down their own medicine.

MEDICAL

From previous page

618 medical employees, including 132 doctors, as well as medics and other health care workers, have been killed nationwide since 2003, among the professionals from many fields caught up in Iraq's sectarian violence.

Hundreds, possibly thousands, of other medical personnel are believed to have fled to Iraq's northern semiautonomous Kurdistan region and neighboring countries.

Even with the security gains of the past several months across Iraq, it is still dangerous for doctors and their families if they dare step out of heavily guarded hospital compounds.

Drugs supplies are so low that Iraqis hospitalized for illnesses as serious as cancer are asked to track down their own medicine.

"When we need medicine, we go directly to private pharmacies," said Ahmed Khalil, the 38-year-old owner of an auto repair shop in Fallujah. "We know we're not going to get any from Fallujah hospital."

And when pharmacy shelves are bare, Iraqis turn to the black market.

"Before the invasion, we got our share of medicine through government-owned medicine depots," said a Baghdad pharmacist, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he feared reprisal. He said hospitals and clinics get some drugs from the medical depots, but it's rarely enough for the number of people in need.

"Sometimes we get medicine stolen by employees who work at the depots or at hospitals," he said.

At worst, the black-market drugs are dubious knockoffs, according to patients, doctors and pharmacists alike.

Treating gang culture as an illness

The commandments of violence followed by those who often end up dead or in prison make no sense to someone not brought up in this type of culture: "Thou shalt carry a gun for protection," "thou shalt not snitch," and "thou shalt recruit" are just three of the notions that guide youth on the street.

This distorted way of thinking is viewed as a disease, an addiction to incarceration and death syndrome, by educator Joseph Marshall who has intervened with treatment to save hundreds of at-risk kids, taught them rules to stay alive, and now trains others to use the same methodology.

Joseph Marshall Jr., Ph.D., is co-founder and executive director of Omega Boys Club / Street Soldiers (www.street-soldiers.org), a drug-free San Francisco-based organization that emphasizes violence prevention and educational achievement. He is also founder of the Alive and Free Movement, and author of "Street Soldier: One Man's Struggle to Save a Generation, One Life at a Time."

Question: When did you first start to view violence as a disease, and why?

Answer: I've been in this work for 20 years, but about 10 years ago I began hearing violence described as a public health issue; read parts of a book ("Deadly Consequences") by Deborah Prothro-Stith, a dean of public health at Harvard, and met her; and talked to young people who said it was like they had an illness. About the same time, I read a book called "Uprising," in which gang members in Los Angeles described their gang lifestyle as having caught a disease when they were very young. A doctor in Los Angeles suggested that one should combat the problem as if they were fighting an infectious disease. The first time I put a framework on how this disease works was after I saw

a film in the mid-'90s called "Menace II Society" about growing up in urban neighborhoods. Everyone gets killed, and I remember leaving the theater thinking, "How does that happen?" I sort of did an autopsy backwards on the film of what produced the deaths and what could have been changed. That began my first list of the risk factors of violence, and how young people get infected. I realized that once I knew exactly what it was, I would know how to prevent kids from being a victim or perpetrator and rehabilitate them if they were seriously into violence.



L.J. ANDERSON

Q: How does a youth develop this "disease"?

A: One gets it through the germs of bad information, bad advice, bad example and bad instruction—none of which look bad. They all look good and sound good. It is presented by someone older or wiser who says that in order to survive, you must do these things. But if he takes this advice, he stands a good chance of dying or going to prison. For the uninitiated and unprotected without nonnegotiable adults around, it's easy for these bad things to look good. With the presence of music, it's triply hard.

The images are projected as fun and a way to be with friends. I use this metaphor of disease because, ultimately, it affects the rest of their well-being. I was speaking in a prison and a guy started crying and said, "I went to prison for someone else." A violence commandment is "I shall be down for thy homeboy right or wrong." You and I aren't going to jail for anybody, but he went to jail for 25 to life for something he didn't do. They don't get it and they don't know how they got this way.

Q: How do you treat it?

A: The four-step treatment process is to

deprogram the thinking — the commandments of violence; the second step is to eliminate the risk-taking factors, the third is to deal with the emotional residue of anger, fear and pain; and the fourth is to inoculate or prevent infection. Suppose you have an 8-year-old boy and just as you give him his measles and mumps immunizations, you can significantly decrease the chance of a young person becoming violent by telling him what risk-taking factors he should keep out of his life, helping him deal with whatever emotional issues he brings to the table, and giving him rules to live by that will decrease his chances of infection.

Q: What are some of the risk factors, and rules for living?

A: A destructive family environment is never right, but the things I can control are guns, drugs, alcohol, attitude, material(istic) values, seeing women as a commodity, and fearship versus friendship. A lot of relationships are based on domination and control. Their greatest obstacle is peer pressure, so I give them a rule to inoculate them from peer pressure. A friend will never lead you to danger, so the filter for every relationship in your life should be danger. If they live by that rule, there's a good chance that love, family or peer pressure will never be a problem.

I also discovered the destructive language of violence. When I was teaching school, there was one word that started more fights than any other word, and I forbade my kids to use it. Whenever anyone called someone a b----, it went to another level. I began to look at words and names that hurt, demean and make people feel like they have to retaliate. A lot of them call it slang, but it's a risk factor.

LJ Anderson writes on health matters every Tuesday. She can be reached at lj.anderson@yahoo.com.

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