

Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in the African American Community Without Reinventing the Wheel

—by John K. Holton

Meharry Medical College, the oldest historically black medical college in the United States, held its 3rd Annual Lloyd C. Elam Mental Health Symposium in Fall, 1992. The symposium provides a forum for state-of-the-art discussions on current issues of mental health among leading child sexual abuse authorities, researchers, medical students and faculty representing the diverse African American community. Specifically, the objectives of this year's symposium were:

- To offer professionals working in the field of child sexual abuse the opportunity to share approaches for intervention and treatment of sexual abuse.
- To explore the impact of alcohol and other drug addiction on child sexual abuse and make implications for successful prevention and treatment strategies.
- To highlight the status and magnitude of the problem of sexual abuse and incest in the African-American community and determine strategies for health recovery.
- To promote creative audio-visual productions on prevention to be sponsored by community youth groups.

I was given the honor of being this year's invited symposium speaker. Selecting as my theme, "Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in the African American Community Without Reinventing the Wheel," I outlined the issues and future directions needed to be taken by blacks desiring to prevent child sexual abuse. In summary, I stated that we need to begin with what we know about this insidious form of child maltreatment and determine if the methods

we're using are preventing the problem. I happen to think that the field's approach isn't working well when it comes to the African American community; further, I happen to believe that our collective inventiveness is needed and not a reliance on what has been used.

New avenues of approach must be developed, and it is the responsibility of African American professionals to develop a descriptive and conceptual knowledge base for understanding the problem. This knowledge base should:

1. Recognize the failure of current research findings in clarifying the problem of child sexual abuse in black communities;
2. Address the need for a holistic and comprehensive analytical framework that attends to the cultural body of black people and incorporates the diverse socioeconomic realities of that community;
3. Examine underlying issues such as race, gender, and age discrimination which tend to be overlooked in prevention and treatment efforts for African Americans families; and
4. Elucidate our understanding of black culture.

These efforts will help illuminate many critical issues surrounding child sexual abuse in the black community and hopefully will lead to more effective prevention activities in the future.

Editor's Note: The full text of Dr. Holton's inspiring and insightful message is scheduled to be printed in the Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved.

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College-Wide

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role in sponsoring program activities. Student-centered organizations such as honor societies, sororities, and social clubs co-sponsor many events related to the child abuse program. (Faculty and staff members also lend their support.) Involvement at this level serves to reinforce students' understanding of the issues and helps to nurture their commitment to preventing child abuse. To facilitate this "developmental" process, the program engages several methods of information dissemination which include a series of convocations and forums, a speaker's bureau, and a newsletter. These varied activities will help ensure that a broad base of students receives child abuse and neglect information.

During convocations and forums, students are introduced to an array of topical issues in the field of child maltreatment and are exposed to guest speakers from diverse professional backgrounds such as mental health, child advocacy, law enforcement, and medicine. Convocational events consist of large assemblies of the Spelman community at which senior level professionals in child welfare or related areas speak on their area of expertise. Some speeches and presentations have included, for example, a social worker's account of her experiences in deal-

ing with abused children and their families; a Juvenile Court judge's discussion of legal issues in abuse and neglect; and a pediatrician's overview of situations encountered in identifying and reporting suspected abuse and neglect cases. In comparison to the more sizeable gatherings, forums comprise smaller informational sessions in which students are able to dialogue with experts around issues such as psychological consequences of child maltreatment, treatment strategies in child abuse and neglect, and identification of leading agencies and organizations in the field. Representatives of national organizations such as the Child Welfare League of America and the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Child Protection and Family Support have been invited to appear before the audience of program participants. Throughout the duration of the College-Wide Program, the forums and convocations have provided an enriching experience for students and other individuals who attend.

In another knowledge-building venue, the College-Wide Program on Child Abuse and Neglect instituted a speaker's bureau to disseminate information about child abuse and neglect prevention. Spear-headed during the second year of the program, the bureau

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