

Speaker raises international health issues

by Geoff Martin

"In some countries in the Third World, 10 per cent of you would not live to breathe your first breath."

The audience was silent as Dr. John Jamilton, a public health specialist with the World Bank, spoke before a world health symposium held last Saturday at Dalhousie.

"If you do survive the first week of life, even more of you will die in the first year," continued Hamilton. Approximately 20 percent of the children die before the end of their first year of life.

Whooping cough, diphtheria, measles and diarrhea are still often fatal in Africa, especially among the malnourished. Smallpox has been eliminated thanks to the efforts of the World Health Organization, Hamilton reported.

Dr. Hamilton stressed medical and social effects of chronic diseases like river blindness, leprosy and bulharzy which are caused primarily by unclean water. These diseases often strike young people from 10 to 20 years of age, slowly sapping the victim's strength until they die. "The centre of West Africa has been denuded because health problems have driven away many young people, causing immense social disruption," he said.

Hamilton said war is a major cause of many of the world's health

problems, in response to a question from the audience. "It causes disruptions in families and communities, and besides death it often brings famine and pestilence. In Ethiopia, war has caused a massive increase in orphaned children, prostitution and the frequency of venereal disease," he said.

And What of Women?

From his experience in Zambia and Nigeria, Hamilton stated, "Life in the Third World is especially dangerous for women. Women may be married at 12 or 13, and if they cohabit they will become pregnant. There is a good chance the baby will be stillborn, or a small pelvis might cause obstructed labour and possibly death."

Women often have eight or nine pregnancies, knowing only three or four babies will survive. Children, especially males, become economic commodities in countries with no old age security or laws preventing exploitation of child labour.

The risk of death for the mother during childbearing escalates dramatically after the fourth child. "In some countries, Ethiopia for example, you would be in the minority if you lived through ten births," Hamilton said. Most women are delivered in the villages where they live, perhaps by their grandmothers, "who might have some strange ideas about child delivery."

In Zambia, women in labour are often told to push after the first contraction and often become exhausted by the second stage, increasing the risk of death to both mother and child.

If a woman dies delivering her fourth baby, the previous children will have trouble surviving. Should a baby survive its mother, it will not be breastfed and might be rejected by the family and community.

Where do we go From Here?

To improve the quality of health in Third World states, Hamilton says state-wide rural health programs must be developed.

"Each community must recognize and accept the responsibility for its own health care by allowing the national government to train one or more of its people as rural health workers," he said. In addition, he stressed the system must be biologically appropriate, socially acceptable, and technically achievable.

Dr. Hamilton urged the audience not to underestimate what many governments are doing. "They are dealing with millions of people and problems that would knock you and I flat on our backs," he said.

The well-attended symposium was sponsored by the Dalhousie Medical Students Society.



GUNS OR BUTTER?

- Over 450 million children in the World have the following six major diseases: Measles, Whooping cough, tetanus, polio, tuberculosis and diphtheria (all curable).
- Over 1 billion children live without clean water.
- At least 15 million children die yearly of malnutrition.

Source: International Red Cross

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