

A change of focus

During a discussion at the autumn 2005 DMCN Editorial Board meeting, I mentioned that prior to becoming a doctor I worked as an engineer analyzing nuclear weapons' testing data. After the meeting, Dr Jean-Pierre Lin suggested, that in the current world climate, I write an editorial on how I intellectually and morally underwent a metamorphosis from an expert in high atmospheric nuclear physics to a specialist surgeon in the care of children with disabilities. I feigned interest but brushed it off in my own mind as quickly as possible. I have always had, and continue to have, the greatest respect for the men and women who wear the military and civilian uniforms of our nations. Furthermore, my work was done more than 25 years' ago and is now, no doubt, relegated to obscure government reports and possibly doctoral theses.

Yet, a long transatlantic flight has a way of allowing the mind to keep a steady prick on one's conscience. As I look about the world today, where one-third of our children go to bed hungry, a great number do not even get a basic education, and many live in unhygienic squalor without even a chance of reasonable healthcare, I cannot help but think that we are simply spending too much of this world's human and natural resources on developing weapons. The technology of killing has become too sophisticated, too indiscriminate, too lethal, and too expensive for human beings to sustain. It is time for human culture to catch up with technology. We can feed, educate, and care for the world's children if we are willing to develop our intellect and reason, discover and embrace a shared morality, and redirect resources from objects that hurt to those that heal.

The potential of finding a shared morality between different nations, cultures, and faiths seems daunting if not downright impossible. For any chance of success, a nucleus of thought, emotion, and activity must be discovered and agreed upon by all parties. I suggest that the great commonality among us all is our children. No child comes into this world knowing disability, hatred, or war. It is something we teach them for it is the last thing on a mother's mind as she looks into the eyes of her newborn son or daughter, whether she is in the Americas, Europe, Asia, or Africa. Images abound in art across all cultures of this most incredible moment. The thought that this infant

may some day be the victim of a bullet, landmine, or bomb is repulsive. This repulsion, too, crosses all cultures. And so let the child be where we start.

After 20 years of caring for children with disabilities, I recognize that there is really little that I can 'fix' in these children. I simply cannot remove the disability from most children, but I have learned to focus on the child's abilities as a means to minimize the limitations imposed by their condition. Sometimes there seems to be very little I can do for a child. In these cases, I revert to what these years have taught me and what I now call Dutkowsky's Law: every child is entitled to be fed, warm, clean, and free from pain. That is the minimum that any of us should, can, and must provide. As I travelled home that day on the plane it became clear to me that here was a place that no reasonable human being could disagree to go. If world leaders of every nation, culture, and faith would commit their people and resources to ensuring that every one of their children was fed, warm, clean, and free from pain, I believe they would have remarkably little time and inclination to blow each other up.

The Times once asked G K Chesterton to write an essay on 'What is wrong with the world?'. Chesterton responded, 'I am.' His two words are as true today as they were in his time. In the end we can only change ourselves. It is not what we believe but maybe our willingness to act as a courageous witness in this day that needs to change. And so I am declaring today as 'The Day of the Child' in which it will be my priority to seek out and meet the basic needs of the children in my community. Tomorrow I will declare it again, and so the day after. And I invite you to join me, for this journal crosses the world of nations, cultures, and faiths. If enough of us are willing to commit daily that every child is fed, warm, clean, and free from pain, the world will change for the betterment of all, and we will collectively learn and experience the meaning of human virtue.

DOI: 10.1017/S0012162206001678

Dr Joseph P Dutkowsky