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FINAL EDITION

All must help curb violence;
But local expert **Peter Jaffe** says friends and family
shouldn't be blamed when it occurs.

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Neighbours, friends and families must be the first line of defence in curbing domestic violence, says an internationally renowned London expert on the subject.

"This work is too important to simply leave only for the police and the shelter and the courts to think about," said **Peter Jaffe**, academic director at Western's Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children.

Domestic violence has been in the spotlight in London during the last week on two fronts:

- Vahida Blazevic of London died from injuries she suffered in an assault. Her partner is charged with second-degree murder.

- The case of Vanessa Bol resurfaced when London police alleged in a statement of defence that Bol's parents are partly responsible for her death because they didn't report contact between her and her former boyfriend, Emerson Dominguez, when they knew he was not supposed to contact the teen.

Dominguez shot Bol, 17, dead on Nov. 3, 2003. Her parents have sued the police force, alleging they were negligent in protecting their daughter.

The police action drew sharp criticism from Megan Walker, a prominent advocate in the fight against woman abuse, who said police were trying to "further their own case" by blaming Bol's family.

Jaffe said while neighbours, friends, families and co-workers should play an active role with professionals involved in violence against women, "I don't want them blamed for not taking action, persecuted or made to feel guilty."

Jaffe said the goal is to raise awareness and give the public ideas about what to do and say when confronted with domestic violence.

It's similar to the problem faced 20 years ago with drinking and driving, he said.

Once a taboo subject, the community has now taken an active role in combatting impaired driving.

"There's a new standard about our expectation as friends, family and co-workers when it comes to drinking and driving," he said.

The same is happening with woman abuse, Jaffe said.

"We're trying to change the norms, but we're not there yet on the issue of woman abuse."

London and its police force have long been heralded as leaders in combatting domestic violence.

And, only four months ago, police Chief Murray Faulkner drew praise for calling domestic violence a "gender problem" that will change only with a new attitude among men.

"We need to have some frank conversations about what it is to be a man," he said. "Violence is the symptom, not the cause. Men, and what it is to be a man in our society, (are) the problem."

He also urged men to speak out if they suspect domestic violence involving family and friends.

But Walker says the latest legal move by the police services board -- and by extension, London police -- in the Bol civil suit may have damaged a relationship with the force.

"The London police services board showed tremendous leadership in the area of woman abuse issues and this is counter to that and is very damaging to the relationship built over time," said Walker, executive director of the London Abused Women's Centre.

Friends and families can't fix things for abused women and can't be held responsible for the homicide of an abused woman, she said.