Early intervention critical in domestic violence

By Bob Klanac

When it comes to domestic violence, University of Western Ontario faculty member Peter Jaffe finds it hard to determine exactly what needs to be done first.

"It's hard to pick one or two," he says. "Domestic violence is such a complex issue."

"Enhanced risk assessment, strategies in police, dealing with perpetrators, there's quite a few."

Jaffe, academic director of Western's Centre for Research on Violence Against Women & Children and a professor in the Faculty of Education and Department of Psychiatry, is speaking in the wake of the release of the fourth annual domestic violence death review committee's annual report to the Ontario coroner's office.

Jaffe and Barbara Lent, Associate Professor with the Department of Family Medicine and Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry Associate Dean of Equity and Gender Issues, were members of the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee which authored the report, recently released by the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario.

The report's 33 recommendations focus on preventative issues – measures that could make a difference in the struggle against domestic violence.

"We've got to heighten the awareness of neighbours, co-workers, people who come in contact with it everyday," he says.

Workplaces can also become more involved. Employers, specifically, may have a number of different roles in the issue.

"If there are employees being stalked, or harassed by an ex-wife or husband, they have to do what they can to protect the employee," says Jaffe.

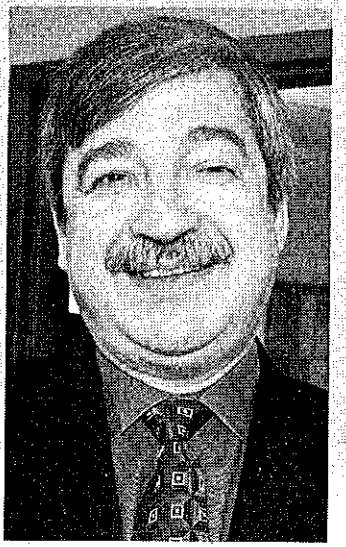
"If employees in a relationship work together, it can be a very complicated relationship to disentangle. You have to respect the rights of both employees in the workplace."

Being a bystander to a relationship breakdown is a difficult position to be in but one where intervention of some kind can play an important role.

"In three of the cases in the report, all the families had awareness in front of them but what to do about it wasn't as clear," says Jaffe.

Jaffe says those not in the middle of the situation are an asset in that they can see the signs more clearly, encourage people to get help, counselling or even call the police when threats are made.

"However we encourage people not to risk their own lives but to provide support to help people find the help that they need," he says.



Peter Jaffe

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Jaffe says intervention at that stage can be effective in trying to get somebody help before they become deeply involved in the justice system.

It's important to appreciate gender differences in these situations. Women often talk to women for support "whereas men tend to operate through denial, hoping the problems will go away. It's much more difficult for men to reach out to each other and help each other find solutions."

Jaffe and some colleagues have developed an interactive theatre play to help people understand how intervention in a domestic violence issue can affect outcomes.

"Missed Opportunities is an interactive theatre production where we perform a play twice," he says. "The first time, the outcome heads toward a tragic ending. The second time through we let the men and women in the audience intervene in the play and talk to the characters to work toward having a more positive outcome at the end."

Despite the report's grim tales of domestic abuse, Jaffe says he doesn't want to give a message of despair or helplessness.

"There are changes in every sector and I think we can take a lot of pride that Western is leading the way in this."