

## Women's Health

### Social Factors Play Decisive Role

*The last time you wrote to me, you had asked me to write about my experiences in working in my own hospital. In reply I had written to you a long letter based on my personal observations regarding women's health. I had asked for your suggestions as to how I could provide you with focussed information.*

*Two weeks ago when I was posted in paediatrics, I saw a young mother with her baby girl whose face was scarred and burnt. Her's was a very shocking and sad story. It affected me very much. I wanted to share my feelings with somebody else. At that time I remembered your advice, "Let us hear your voices directly through your descriptions." I called Sathyavani one of my classmates, and together we decided to talk to the mother and record everything. I had photographs taken with the mother's permission.*

*We sincerely hope that many will share our feelings, especially those in the medical profession, and understand that women's health is undermined by a lot more than just medical conditions. But after everything was done, we still didn't know as to what we should do to help the woman and her child. We realise that there is a big gap between our thoughts and actions.*

*How does one bridge this gap? As an editor of a woman's journal how do you manage to act as well as write? I am beginning to ask myself this question increasingly these days. Is it enough if I became a competent doctor? What can I do about those things which are beyond my control? I hope some of Manushl's readers will provide us with answers.*

**Madhukar Pai**

It was a Thursday and for us, medical students, it was life as usual in the hospital. A baby girl with diarrhoea was brought to the paediatrics ward. As treatment for dehydration was being given, we noticed something abnormal about the baby. She had extensive burn scars on the face, neck and upper chest. We realised that there was a lot more to the story than just diarrhoea.

Bhanupriya, the mother, was a very young girl. We estimated her age to be 15 (she, in fact, didn't remember her own age). Velankanni, her daughter, was about a year old. The baby, who had been suffering from diarrhoea for four days, was dehydrated, scrawny and severely malnourished. The scars on her thin body completed the sad picture. We asked Bhanu when and how the baby had suffered the burns. "Two weeks ago her father, in a drunken fit, threw a burning lamp at her," she said as a matter of fact. We probed further. What came out

was a shocking tale of violence, oppression and cruelty.

"My father had four wives. I am the only daughter of his first wife. My mother committed suicide when I was very young," she started. She



**Velankanni with her mother  
Bhanupriya**

had met her husband Chandan Raj one and a half years back. "He used to follow me in the neighbourhood and later we started going out. A few weeks later I became pregnant. He then took me to live with him. The baby was born a year ago. We got married only after the baby was born. But before that I had to be converted to his religion — Christianity. For the past three months I have not been living with him. They drove me out of the house."

Bhanu's husband, a mechanic, was very nice to her before the marriage. But this behaviour changed after the girl was born. He started drinking and abusing her. "He used to beat me and the baby, at times even with stones. I took it quietly. What could I do?" she said. He did not stop with this, he started going out with another woman.

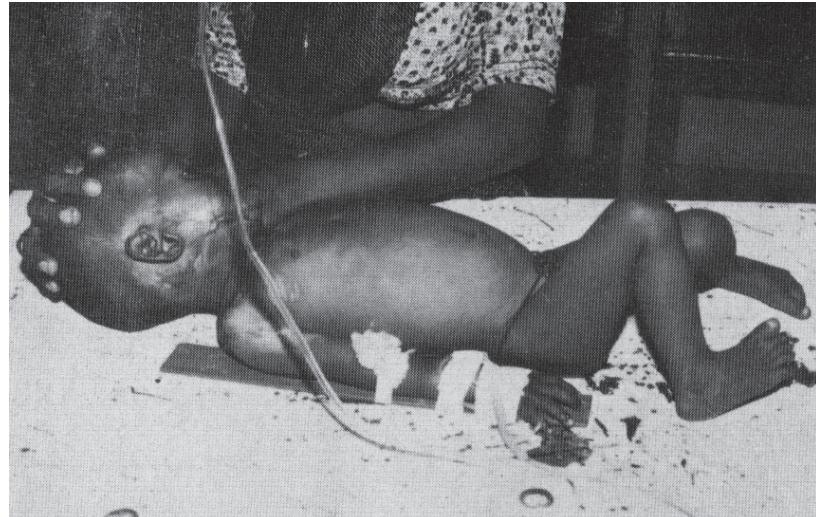
Then even the in-laws began ill-treating her. Her father-in-law also used to beat her up. Fighting became an everyday affair. During one such fight, the husband threw a burning

lamp at the baby. Even as the baby was being rushed to the hospital he didn't seem to be particularly concerned. "My husband never cared for my daughter and didn't feel sorry that he had injured her. He said, 'Let the girl die, what does it matter?' "The situation worsened rapidly. The father-in-law started telling his son, "Send this woman and her girl away. She is no good. We will find you a better woman to get married to."

About three months ago the husband and the in-laws drove her out with the baby. "They said they didn't like me and did not want me any-more." Since then she has been living with her parents. Even they don't want her because she married out of religion. Her stepmother even asked her to go and commit suicide. She has since come to know that her husband has got engaged to another woman. She is not aware that the law forbids this.

After all this, we asked her, "How do you feel about this — your husband deserting you, burning your daughter, getting engaged to another woman?" She did not look at us or reply. She seemed resigned to her fate. "What are your plans now? How will you support your girl after she recovers?" we asked. "I can't go back to my parents' house. They won't take me back. I will probably do some housework and earn money. May be I will have to put my girl in an orphanage but I don't want to let go of her now. She is my only support." "Will you marry again if someone is willing to take care of you and your girl?" we asked her. "No," she said emphatically. "My mother wanted me to give away the baby and get married again. But I said no. I want to make my girl study. She will feed me tomorrow."

Stories like this are probably very common in our country. But, for us, it was the first. We made sure that the baby was rehydrated but did not



**Velankanni being treated for diarrhoea. Scars are visible on right side of face and chest**

have a clue as to what more we could do. We bought the mother lunch and sent her home. Since then we do not know what has been the fate of Bhanu and her daughter.

Bhanu's story taught us something. We learnt that most of our health problems are not because of medical conditions but because of social factors like poverty, ignorance and discrimination. Many of these are beyond the control of doctors. We could treat the acute diarrhoeal episode, but what could we do about the severe malnutrition and physical abuse which predisposed the baby

to infection? The baby, according to the mother, was very tiny and weak when it was born. We weren't very surprised. The mother herself was only a child!

As doctors we can probably take on the worst of disease causing germs but what do we do about those deadly health hazards which come in the form of tyrannical husbands and fathers? We search for answers. □

Sathyavani and Madhukar Pai  
(The authors are final year medical students at Stanley College, Madras).

*I was nothing  
I was no one*

*What can one  
store in a bottomless box?*

*Yet, certain there must be some  
one  
I horded  
scattered moments,  
till I found  
in my womb  
a kicking poem*

*Panna Naik*