Finally, as society’s expectations of professionals become even higher, there must be greater understanding for doctors and the risks that they personally take when dealing every day with the pain and suffering of others. As a minimum, patients’ rights should surely extend to doctors when they themselves are patients, and healthcare professionals must acknowledge the fact that healers, when they are ill, may also suffer profoundly. They need healing too, not just by other experts, but by the understanding and compassion of their colleagues.

As the principal conditions potentially impairing doctors’ fitness to practise are mental health problems, and alcohol-related and drug-related problems, psychiatrists have an important role to play.

As the principal conditions potentially impairing doctors’ fitness to practise are mental health problems, and alcohol-related and drug-related problems, psychiatrists have an important role to play, both in the destigmatisation of mental illness and by providing appropriate assessment and treatment. The National Clinical Assessment Authority (NCAA, 2004) in the UK comprehensively reviewed health-related factors involved in doctors’ performance as well as the personal characteristics and behaviour of doctors.

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Mexico, there is an additional twist to the differentiation of gender roles, in the sense that women are expected not to drink alcohol, because it is not compatible with their domestic responsibilities. And so we come back to the issue of domestic violence which was raised by Clark and Wyshak, with the misuse of alcohol by men being closely correlated with physical violence against female partners.

Psychiatrists around the world need to be alert to the continuing stresses on women, from family, partners, work and many other obligations; cultural influences on female mental health are rarely trivial.

THEMATIC PAPER – WOMEN’S MENTAL HEALTH AND OPPRESSION

The confluence of violence towards an intimate partner, substance misuse and mental health: a worldwide problem affecting women

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Violence towards an intimate partner, substance misuse and other mental health disorders are problems that tend to cluster together and result in multiple burdens for afflicted individuals (Desjarlais et al., 1995; Wyshak & Modest, 1996; Wyshak, 2000). They are prevalent not only in high-risk groups but also among members of the general public seeking primary healthcare (Bauer et al., 2000; World Health Organization, 2001), where their afflictions often go undiagnosed and untreated (Edlund et al., 2004; Kramer et al., 2004). Furthermore, violence towards an intimate partner, substance misuse and other mental health disorders involve common symptom pathways, such as psychiatric distress, headache, abdominal pain, gastrointestinal problems and multiple somatic complaints (Berwick et al., 1991), which suggests that the use of an integrated set of screening instruments may lead to early detection and treatment for patients who are suffering from one or more of these problems.

The role of gender

Violence directed at an intimate partner disproportionately affects women: between 10% and 69% of women have at some time experienced such violence, according to a review of 48 population-based studies from a variety of countries around the world (Krug et al., 2002). Similarly important, tobacco smoking, alcohol consumption and the use of illicit drugs (excluding ecstasy, solvents and cannabis) cause a total of approximately 6.9 million deaths annually: 4.9, 1.8 and 0.2 million, respectively (World Health Organization, 2002). Although men use these substances at higher rates than women, the health impact for women is no less significant and for some substances may be even greater (Cormier et al., 2004). Furthermore, neuropsychiatric disorders as a whole afflict approximately 450 million individuals worldwide (World Health Organization, 2001). Of these disorders, depression, which disproportionately affects women, is the leading cause of disability worldwide (World Health Organization, 2001).

Confluence of the three types of problem

Violence towards an intimate partner, substance misuse and other mental health disorders are highly correlated with each other. Substance misuse and other mental health disorders are risk factors for and health outcomes of violence perpetrated by an intimate partner (Riggs et al., 2000). Substance misuse and other mental disorders themselves are highly correlated under the rubric of dual diagnosis. Research specifically addressing these interconnections has found high correlations between the experience of violence, substance misuse and psychiatric distress, characterised by gender and ethnic differences; notably, in women depression and alcoholism are highly correlated (Wyshak & Modest, 1996).