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By Dr. Duane Sands:

After a four-month "leave", I have returned to coverage of the surgical service at the Princess Margaret Hospital. Amongst other duties, I have resumed my role as a trauma surgeon.

Since returning full-time, I have been particularly struck by (an apparent escalation of) interpersonal violence and the brutal effectiveness of Bahamians at harming each other. This is above the unacceptably high baseline of carnage that has existed for more than a decade - it is a national tragedy that I have witnessed from the vantage point of a surgeon and (for many years) director of emergency services at PMH.

We have been beating, raping and killing each other at a rate that identifies us as one of the most violent countries in the world.

Of particular concern is the amount of gun violence that consumes hospital resources.

Over the last five years, while the number of assaults seen at PMH has remained fairly constant at approximately 2,500 cases per year, the number of firearm injuries has increased precipitously. In 2007 there were 119 patients treated with gunshot wounds (GSW.) In 2009, there were 220 GSWs treated at PMH alone. Add in the numbers at Doctors Hospital, the Rand Memorial and elsewhere and the total increases by as much as twenty percent. We will probably eclipse the 2009 numbers this year.

We "do" trauma well at PMH. If you get shot or stabbed, beaten or assaulted, we have a team with the expertise to repair your injuries and help you to get well. While not all seriously injured patients survive, our nurses, junior doctors and medical students are becoming experts at managing seriously injured patients. We certainly do not lack clinical cases for teaching.

We could do an even better job if we had more resources, more blood, more critical care beds...

It is a sad reflection of our reality in 2010. Are these "skills" the ones we wish

to perfect in the course of nation building? They probably are not - but they are absolutely vital to the Bahamian reality. So we treat gun shots and stabbings but they exhaust the resources intended for most other surgical ailments.

As Bahamians, we lament the rising "murder rate" and issue call after call for "someone to do something" as the number climbs. We have focused narrowly on this rate - an index (often recited) which distills the complex societal illnesses and choices that lead to crime, violence and murder to a simple number - one we have embraced so well that we ascribe great social significance to incremental advances or decreases in the absolute number of our brothers and sisters that die. When it goes up... we despair. When it goes down, we celebrate.

We are deceiving ourselves! The "number" tells very little of the true story. It is a raw statistic that fails to capture the depth of the pain, rage, anger, jealousy, misunderstanding or other emotions that lead to violent altercations. Some of these turn tragic if a weapon or the "wrong weapon" is used. The era of rocks and bottles long ago gave way to knives and then small caliber hand guns.

Whatever the number of murders, the truth is that we now live in a society where disputes may be "settled" with deadly artillery from powerful firearms, where weapons are used more often than not and fist fights are certainly no longer common.

The recent international economic calamity has forced us to do some serious reality checking. It has been a real wake-up call that the world is not as well off as we thought. We have to make difficult decisions or face national bankruptcy.

We must now face our national reality and acknowledge that crime and criminality has arisen from us - and has been nurtured by the choices we have made - or not made! We have not made the difficult decisions; we have allowed the rot to set in; we have turned an eye to immoral, unethical and illegal behavior and have pretended that it was OK! We do not live in a peaceful, loving community. We do not care as well as we should for each other.

We have given corrupt and dishonest politicians, doctors, lawyers, pastors and businessmen a free ride.

We have allowed drug trafficking to co-exist with legitimate businesses and have revered drug dealers as neighborhood heroes. We speak warmly of the buoyancy provided to our ailing economy by narco-dollars in the past.

We have refused to acknowledge the contributory role of our individual traffic violations, customs dishonesty, receipt of stolen, counterfeit or pirated goods and services, hiring of illegal immigrants, sexual misconduct or theft of time, supplies or services from our job sites. We have chosen to laugh it off as simply "hustling to make it". We can do that no longer.

I suggest that we have delayed the national introspection and self assessment long enough. As we straighten our financial affairs, we must now simultaneously revamp the societal and cultural choices that have nurtured and sustained the environment that has led to the level of violence and mayhem that we all claim to deplore - but to which most of us contribute - by omission or commission.

Our response must now be deliberate, considered and effective. We must now mean it when we talk about "zero-tolerance." And it has to be a personal decision and change in behavior of each and every Bahamian - not the job of the commissioner of police, attorney general, chief justice or minister of national security.

It is my belief that an infinitely large force of well -trained police officers with unlimited equipment and state-of-the-art weaponry cannot and will not solve this problem. Nor will a hundred courts with a hundred judges. We cannot build jails that are big enough to eliminate the problem.

But be assured - We can solve this problem!

We stand at a moment in our nation's history when we must choose whether to wander along passively as our country descends deeper into violent anarchy, or to stand firmly against the status quo and chart a bold new course to a better place for our children. I believe that only one of these

options is tenable.

Daily PMH exposure has once again heightened my resolve to battle this problem on three fronts - medical, personal and political. It is a battle that demands the commitment of as many of us as possible. There are no quick fixes or easy solutions. There are no surrogates that can carry my load or yours! As Gandhi said, "we must be the change we wish to see in the world!"

History will tell whether we are really serious!

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