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necessary for the College to adapt so that it can be responsive to the global challenges related to mental health. It is acknowledged that the College needs to look outwards more than it has done in the past, scanning new horizons and forming new partnerships so that it can play an active role in international psychiatry for the benefit of all those suffering from mental ill health. The inauguration of the Pan-African Overseas Group of the College in Edinburgh and of the South Asian Overseas Group in Sri Lanka is evidence of the College's determination to take action to meet these needs.

The recent meeting of the European Region of the World Psychiatric Association in Vienna was very successful, and the willingness of all of the participating psychiatric

associations and societies to work together was encouraging. The Royal College welcomes initiatives of this type and is ready to play a full part to ensure their success. It is hoped that such collaboration will lead to improved training to agreed standards so that people with mental illness, wherever they are in the world, can be sure of receiving high-quality care and advocacy for their rights.

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THEMATIC PAPERS – TRAUMA AND THE MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN

Introduction

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Trauma can have both acute and insidious effects upon children's mental health. We present four articles, each of which offers a new perspective on this important topic. As Daniel Pine points out, in the first paper, as many as one in five children in the developed world can expect to experience a truly traumatic event, while half those in developing countries may do so. Such experiences can be either personal – such as emotional or sexual abuse – or impersonal – being shot or blown up in a conflict of which one understands little, except the misery it brings. How do children cope? We know that there are at least two important influences that moderate the impact of trauma on the developing child: the persistence and severity of the experience, and the degree of social support available. Beyond these broad generalisations, little is understood about what should be done or what could be done to minimise the long-term consequences of growing up in an environment characterised by cruelty, exploitation and death.

One of the most highly publicised conflicts involving children is that between the Palestinians and the Israelis, which has now gone on for so long that two generations have had to live with its consequences. Panos Vostanis has studied the impact of living with conflict in the refugee camps of the Gaza Strip. Remarkably, he discovered that acute post-traumatic stress had a tendency to ameliorate

within a matter of months, despite the dire social circumstances of that refugee population. It is just as well that such reactions have a natural history of their own, for preliminary findings suggested a lack of benefit from formal psychotherapeutic intervention.

There are, of course, two sides to this conflict and Sam Tyano considers the plight of children in Jerusalem and their own responses. Many had first-hand experience of its effects, or of its impact upon their relatives; in fact, exposure rates to life-threatening events were amazingly high for both Palestinian and Israeli children. Post-traumatic stress disorders were disturbingly common, even among children who did not live in war zones.

Finally, Luke Dowdney considers the relatively unrecognised problem of children caught up as recruits to organised armed violence. There are many countries in which the pliability of children in early adolescence makes them attractive conscripts to those who seek to dominate communities by force, whether in warfare or – as in this example – in countries ostensibly at peace. He considers the specific case of Rio de Janeiro, a beautiful city surrounded by *favelas* in which drug factions control thousands of heavily armed child *soldados*. While subject to military discipline, such children represent cheap and expendable labour. The prospects for rehabilitating such children into society are daunting in the extreme, and the role to be played by psychiatrists in that process is a challenge yet to be met.