The Effect of the Persian Gulf Crisis on the Psychiatric Hospitalization of Navy Children and Adolescents

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ABSTRACT: The effect of the Persian Gulf Crisis on Navy families was studied through admission rates of children to a private psychiatric hospital, marital status and diagnostic categories. During that time there was a statistical increase in admission of young boys under age twelve and all children from remarried families. Almost one-half of these patients were diagnosed with Dysthymia whereas this diagnosis was given only once during the time period before or after the crisis.

KEYWORDS: separation, loss of father, deployment, Gulf War, family response to external crisis.

Children and adolescents are usually admitted to a psychiatric hospital during a period of crisis. Although the child's self-destructive or aggressive behavior may precipitate that crisis, this is frequently in response to acute or chronic stress within the family. During the past few years we have identified particularly stressful events such as divorce or remarriage, depression or drug or alcohol abuse in a parent, child abuse and geographical moves as significant factors in families with hospitalized children.

Navy families experience a predictable pattern of stress related to the deployment of a father or stepfather for periods ranging from three weeks to eight months at a time. Recently during the mobilization of Navy personnel for active duty in the Persian Gulf an ad-
ditional element of realistic danger heightened anxiety within the family. Children's reactions to this have led to increasing behavior problems, emotional distress and suicidal threats. For example, one eight year old boy threatened suicide because his father was sent to the Gulf two days prior to a planned family vacation trip. In an initial pilot study of stress factors affecting psychiatric hospitalization prior to 1990 almost half of the Navy children admitted to the hospital were admitted while the father or stepfather was away at sea.1

The sudden onset of the Persian Gulf Crisis August 2, 1990 directly impacted on many servicemen when leave was cancelled or time of deployment was extended beyond the normal six month period. Although hostilities also ended abruptly after the war in February, there continues to be concern over Navy personnel still stationed in the area during this period of de-stabilization. This external crisis has had profound social, political and psychological effects on our society. Because of the discreet period of time between onset and termination of the crisis, there was a unique opportunity to study types of admission which may be related to anxiety, depression or family insecurity.

This study is designed to study the extent of the effect of the Persian Gulf crisis on Navy families in Jacksonville, Florida as measured by admission rates of children and adolescents to a private psychiatric hospital. Jacksonville is a large Navy port with three airfields and about thirty surface ships. A submarine base is located in Georgia fifty miles away. About 35% of total admissions to this hospital are through CHAMPUS since the Navy hospital does not provide psychiatric services for children and adolescents.

Method

Subjects

Only children and adolescents of active Navy personnel eligible for deployment were included. All children whose parents were retired, assigned to shore duty or in another branch of military service were excluded. The study sample included 31 children, ages four to twelve, and 46 adolescents, ages thirteen to eighteen admitted to a private psychiatric hospital.

Procedure

All CHAMPUS admissions to the hospital were reviewed for three time periods of seven months each: (1) before the crisis—January