

Poverty Close to Home

"My friend," said Mr. Pickwick, "you don't really mean to say that human beings live down in those wretched dungeons?" (The Pickwick Papers, 1837)

Last spring, I discovered that The Council of Science Editors was organizing a Global Theme Issue on Poverty and Human Development for October 2007. Science journals throughout the world, from developed and developing countries, simultaneously have published papers on this topic to raise awareness, stimulate interest, and stimulate research into poverty and human development. As of September, 233 journals, including the *Nephrology Nursing Journal*, agreed to participate in this project (Council of Science Editors, 2007).

Once I realized that this issue of the *Nephrology Nursing Journal* was joining hundreds of journals from around the globe to focus attention on worldwide poverty, I began to consider how I could incorporate this topic into my President's message. Initially, I studied the globe sitting in my living room. Should I focus on poverty on a far-off continent where AIDS is wiping out generations of people? Perhaps it would be better to describe the poor people living in an exotic country still dealing with a devastating earthquake. Maybe I should instead write about homeless people in another state in my own country, trying to recover from a destructive hurricane. The choice of people and places seemed almost endless.

Just Look Around the Corner

Subsequently I attended a meeting of my Bridgeview Drive Book club, where all the members conveniently live on the same street as I do. We were discussing Betty Smith's classic novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, about a young girl growing up in poverty during the turn of the 20th century (Smith, 1943). Three of my neighbors are exceptional elementary school teachers. During the discussion, one of the teachers who happens to teach at the elementary school in our own neighborhood, mentioned that she is not able to let the students in her class go outside for recess during the colder months of the year because so many of the children do not have mittens to wear. I shook my head in disbelief and asked what is wrong with those parents, sending their children to school without mittens? After all, when you live on the shore of Lake Superior; mittens, hats and boots are considered necessities for survival. Frostbite and hypothermia are constant concerns during the winter months. In order to prevent these injuries, fingers, ears and feet need the added protection. My friend informed me that I had misinterpreted the issue; the reason that the children do not have any mittens to wear is not parental neglect, their families simply cannot afford to buy them. I was stunned. I never realized that I had neighbors that could not afford mittens for their children.



What was most upsetting to me was not the fact that these children had no mittens, but that I had never even recognized this problem existed in my own back yard. Was I that blind to poverty in my own neighborhood? Could I really be as clueless as Mr. Pickwick, my favorite Dickens character (Dickens, 1837)? I was determined to uncover more information. What I discovered is that education, housing, healthcare, and childcare are the issues most often linked with poverty.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 31% of the residents in my community struggle to earn enough money just to pay for basic needs such as food, clothing and housing. Meanwhile, 13.6% are considered to be living in poverty. Here was another revelation for me: only two other counties in my state had a higher percentage of citizens living in poverty. In addition, 76% of people living without health insurance are actually employed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). These statistics are appalling and unacceptable. While concern over mittens may not compare to hunger and homelessness, none of us need to look very far to see that poverty exists in our world.

Global Theme Issue Raises Awareness

When you think about it, the Global Theme Issue on Poverty and Human Development project is already successful at reaching the objectives of raising awareness and stimulating interest in human poverty. It seems a bit ironic though, that the first person to have their awareness raised because of this message is me.

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References

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