The Family Under Attack

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Over dinner one night at one of the recent major heart meetings, some colleagues and I discussed a wide range of issues—from the Florida vote recount to the new American College of Cardiology Foundation. Much of our discussion, however, centered on our families and the challenges of marriage and raising children. Initially, we brought each other up to date on where our children were and what they were doing. As our discussion deepened, however, it became clear that many of us believed that the institution of the traditional family was under severe attack in our current society. I debated whether this subject was a suitable one for an Editor's Page, but concluded that anything this important is a must for all busy physicians to consider in their own lives.

The statistics are certainly eye-opening. Currently about half of marriages end in divorce. The number of children in a U.S. household has fallen from three in 1915 to two in 1999. About two thirds of married women are in the workforce. In the U.S., about one third of children are born out of wedlock, and there seems to be a diminishing role or absenteeism of the father in many homes.

In medicine, physicians have traditionally worked long and irregular hours, which can place an enormous strain on a marriage and markedly reduce parental interaction with children. If anything, this is getting worse as physicians work harder and longer for less money.

A colleague recently accepted a volunteer position that was going to require long hours away from home. When he discussed this with his wife and children, his 8-year-old daughter asked him the serious, poignant question: "Will you still be my daddy?" Although he quickly reassured her he would, he realized how limited his time with her might be.

As one thinks of families, it is also clear that many individuals are single, and many are in non-traditional arrangements. Their challenges are no less severe than challenges within the traditional family unit, which is struggling to cope with the fast-paced stresses of a modern society. Because members of the medical profession are so time-challenged, it seems that we may need to pay special attention to this problem. The following represent a few of the things we discussed over dinner that night and some additional thoughts I have had since.

1. The family is potentially the most important stabilizing force for good in society. A strong family, where children are taught appropriate social and moral virtues, will go a long way toward stabilizing our civilization.

2. Father physicians may need to assume greater responsibility for nurturing their children. This is a matter of priority and time. As the radio soundbite message says: "Isn't it about time?" In order to achieve this, priority must be given to birthdays, sports contests, and other significant events in the life of each child. I well remember my father's presence at each of those events in my life and have tried to do the same with each child and grandchild. When our children were younger, we held a weekly "Family Home Evening" on Monday nights. It's wonderful to see our children doing the same thing with our grandchildren. I also took each child with me, in turn, on selected trips. They still talk about those trips, even today. Those were some of the greatest bonding experiences of our life.

3. Have a weekly "date" with your spouse. That does not mean watching Monday night football together! Sometimes this is a little more problematic. Although this implies dinner, a movie, a concert, or the like, it's not the event that counts but the time together. A walk in the park, going to get an ice cream cone, a window shopping expedition, and visiting a museum may turn out to be extraordinary bonding experiences.

4. Do common religious roots keep a family together? "The family that prays together, stays together." My own personal experience and general observations seem to confirm the truth of that old saying. Certainly the recognition of a Supreme Being and of a spiritual side to our nature goes a long way toward putting the rest of our busy lives in perspective. When that is shared, I believe it strengthens the whole family.

5. Lastly, it seems that we need to guide our children more to expose them to worthwhile, educational, and uplifting experiences. The general climate of adverse influences seems to have mushroomed over the past few years. Whether it is the violence and immorality of some movies and television; pornography on the internet; or cigarettes, alcohol, and addictive drugs, it seems that our children and grandchildren need a loving, guiding hand more than ever. The power of our own personal example may be the greatest influence for good we can provide.

As you can see from the above, our dinner discussion was actually quite profound, as dinner discussions go. For some of you whose families are "nearly perfect," you can skip reading this column. For the rest of us, however, we need all the help we can get.