

EDITORIAL

ADOLESCENCE AND THE NEED FOR AN ADOLESCENT UNIT IN HACETTEPE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

Is a separate unit for adolescents really needed in a children's medical center or hospital, particularly in Hacettepe Children's Hospital?

This question was raised last year when a decision to establish a unit for adolescent children at the Hacettepe Children's Hospital was pending. The question was answered affirmatively and the decision to establish such a unit was made. A young pediatrician on the Hacettepe staff was sent to Boston Children's Hospital for a two - year period of training in Dr. J. Roswell Gallagher's widely - known unit for adolescents. It is expected that Hacettepe's own unit will commence operations on his return this coming year.

The reasons for making this decision are manifold.

A prime responsibility for those who care for adolescents is to acquire an appreciation of the significance of the changes that take place, both psychologically and physically, during adolescence. In dealing with adolescents, except in cases of real illness, it is usually not necessary to «prescribe a remedy» but a knowledge of adolescent behavior can make working with these children, in both sickness and health, easier and more successful.

The normal adolescent is not a psychologically sick person but he is often a mixed - up or confused person. It should be realized, however, that there is an inherent strength in people which enables the great majority of adolescents to come through this period of confusion in a healthy state.

The adolescent's confusion has a number of roots. One very obvious source is the sudden growth which becomes apparent in early adolescence. The typical adolescent at first tends to ignore the changes in his body until all at once they become too obvious to be denied. At this point he cannot escape a realization of the changes but, typically, tries either to hide them or to advertise them. He has lost the security of a familiar body and is not yet at home with the new one.

Deep - seated but less obvious are the changes in the endocrine system which start before the physical changes and continue for about four years. As a result of the endocrine changes the young person is faced with new physical sensations which are not consistent with his previous experience. Sexual feelings, which are truly psychosomatic in origin, now arise. These are influenced by the situations in which the adolescent finds himself, and by his emotions, and are stimulated by glandular secretions. Sexual feelings of this sort may be very disturbing to the young adolescent and are a contributing factor to his sense of confusion.

How does the normal adolescent handle such feelings? Frequently he channels them into an interest in music, sports or academic affairs. Whatever he goes into, however, he goes into with an intensity that may be exhausting and, here, a pediatrician experienced in adolescence and its problems may be of great help not only to the child himself but to his family and teachers. A pediatrician oriented in the care of adolescents can help those who deal with such children to remain calm, though not indifferent, in the face of rapid changes and can help them to avoid fear and panic. He can give them a stable baseline on which successful handling of adolescents can be built. A pediatrician without special training in adolescent problems may not be able to instill such confidence in others because of his own uneasiness - an uneasiness which is largely based on the general failure to recognize the underlying strength of the adolescent despite his seeming instability.

The ordinary problems of adolescence which I have briefly sketched here may, furthermore, be intensified in a country like Turkey today in which society itself is changing very rapidly. The developing role of women in Turkey and the changing relationships between the sexes, to cite but two examples, can crucially affect a young person who is going through a period of change and confusion himself. Here again an experienced counselor may prove invaluable.

It is not my intention in these few paragraphs to explore the whole vast field of adolescence but merely to offer a few of the reasons leading to our decision to establish a separate unit for adolescents at Hacettepe. It is our feeling that the need for such a unit is great and that its establishment will prove a significant contribution to the work that Hacettepe Children's Hospital is doing.

Ihsan Doğramacı, M.D.