

of Men

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

I was invited to the opening ceremony of the 10th World Congress of Bioethics recently. I had seen the list of speakers at the opening ceremony and one in particular stood out: Dame Silvia Cartwright. She was a judge at the ongoing Cambodian war crimes tribunal. She spoke about the welfare of the testifying victims at these trials and how their roles came to be secondary to the central function played by the court in seeking the truth. Towards the end of her speech, she was reading out testimonies of the victims verbatim and there was a moment where she struggled to retain her composure. At that point, the horror of it all struck home in the audience that such monstrous acts could be inflicted by one human being on another, even upon women and children.

Strangely enough, my own experience culminating in Dame Cartwright's lecture started one evening a year ago when I was watching the National Geographic Channel. A programme had just come on titled *Nazi Scrapbooks From Hell*. In this programme an old scrapbook containing photos taken by an SS officer called Karl Hoecker on the life of the SS officers at Auschwitz during the second half of 1944 had been discovered. According to the programme's website, (<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/episode/nazi-scrapbooks-from-hell-3675#tab-Overview>), this was the time when the infamous gas chambers were running at full tilt and the crematoriums were breaking down from overuse.

Yet the photos were ordinary pictures taken of the SS community enjoying themselves on a picnic, relaxing on a sundeck, eating blueberries and playing the accordion. I remember watching the programme in its

entirety till midnight though I had to wake up early the next morning. There was discomfort, morbid fascination, dread and intense concentration as the documentary educated me on minute details of the goings on of the extermination process. Needless to say, I did not have restful sleep thereafter.

Other events that somehow crossed my path included a scene from the movie *Shutter Island* as the character played by Leonardo DiCaprio liberated the Dachau concentration camp and saw a grotesque stack of corpses abandoned by the fleeing Nazis; a BBC interview I heard on the way to work of a journalist named David Rohde who discovered evidence of the Srebrenica massacre of more than 7000 Muslim men and boys; continuous coverage on the trial of Comrade Duch in Cambodia, and another BBC documentary on Auschwitz.

Somehow the nexus of all these disturbing events converged on an article that I had read in the *Financial Times* weekend edition on 5 June 2010 titled *The Faces of Evil* (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f70d8fde-6f64-11df-9f43-00144feabdc0.html>). After Dame Cartwright's lecture I sat down to lunch with a distinguished member of our profession. He started the conversation by wondering why was it that the world had quickly forgotten the lessons of World War II. I countered that we are dealing with Evil here in its truest form.

In that FT article, the authors spoke of four types of Evil. The first would be Demonic Evil that was rare and probably best left to the theologians and religious orders. The second would be Instrumental Evil which is really committing evil while fully aware that it is evil, but for some purpose and end in mind. The third type was also a close relative

of Instrumental Evil, where evil was driven by Idealism. In this form of Evil, some form of idealism that the Tutsis and the Jewry were sub-human and therefore should be exterminated drove the Rwanda situation and the Nazi horrors. The final typing was that of Stupid Evil where Evil was propagated by a form of thoughtlessness. This was where decent people could be led down the garden path by a series of incremental steps involving habituation, socialisation, distancing and divided responsibility. This form of manipulation may well explain why the Germanic people till today have a lot of angst about what had happened in their recent past.

Now the critical question I asked myself as I thought of writing this article was whether I had encountered Evil personally. I believe that I have. I recall running an outpatient clinic in the public sector in the late 80s when a female patient accompanied by her husband came in for malignant hypertension. Her blood pressure was through the roof and she was on traditional herbal medicine. She was a quiet middle-aged woman who worked as a cleaner, and was dominated by her husband. I tried to convince her to start treatment or to be admitted but the husband refused. On trying to persuade him, I told him that if his wife were not treated, she would die in a year's time from a stroke. I remember the look in his eyes as he digested this piece of vital information.

Subsequently the resistance to medical treatment or hospitalisation became more strident. The couple came to see me a couple of times after that initial visit and defaulted on the appointments thereafter. I recall my helplessness as I discussed the situation with my boss and there was nothing that we could do.

and Evil

Sure enough, about a year later, an “Inspector of the Dead” called me and asked me about this particular patient. She was found dead in her home and the policeman was just tying up loose ends as she was a patient of the public sector, and a death certificate was signed up routinely. Till today I believe that I had come face to face with evil intent and had looked him in the eye.

What is point of writing about Evil? The important thing about Evil is not to appease. Appeasement will lead to Evil intentions gaining root and all the consequences that follow. When one talks about appeasement, Neville Chamberlain and the Bosnian conflict come to mind. In today’s world when the ongoing tensions between faiths and ethic groups are simmering, we must be mindful and pre-emptive against situations from getting out of hand. Even in Singapore, we have a recent past where racial tensions have led to disastrous outcomes.

In my recent readings on the Nazi horrors from a book titled *Auschwitz: A History* by Sybille Steinbacher, I came across the topic of doctors who conducted experiments in Auschwitz. These included gynaecologist Carl Clauberg who performed experiments with mass sterilisation, Horst Schumann who performed euthanasia on the mentally and physically handicapped, Johann Paul Kremer who starved inmates to study the connection between hunger and life expectancy, Hans Munch who studied various bacterial infections and of course the nefarious Josef Mengele. Mengele specialised in genetics, did all his barbarous work on children

and experimented on at least a thousand pair of twins. He would conduct experiments on one twin and if that twin died, he would order the execution of the other to look at the tissues as a control subject. He escaped the war crime tribunal and was in Brazil till his accidental death while swimming in 1979.

Unfortunately, such involvement of doctors in these settings did not end in World War II. In our modern history, we have the infamous Tuskegee study on syphilitic black men, the radiation experiments carried out by the US government during the Cold War, serial killers such as Harold Shipman, and even the Cartwright Inquiry in New Zealand that was named after Dame Cartwright herself.

Ultimately, in today’s world of the final frontier in medicine, we are poised on the brink of cracking the billions of “nonsensical” sequences of base pairs. That deciphering process with the understanding of the immune system will surely allow us to reach out and

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touch the “face of our God/Creator”. That surely holds huge promise for mankind, with the potential of a better life for all.

Yet with such knowledge and power

gleaned, and the ever-lurking presence of ill intentions, we must be mindful and prepared to detect, guard against and confront such nidus where the beginnings of evil intentions can coalesce. At this juncture, I want to recognise our colleagues who are heavily involved in research and development; the scientific community; and the physicians and surgeons of the future who will apply this new knowledge and power to the good of individual patients. Even so, we have to comprehend that there are lessons that history can teach us. After all, the medical profession is the antithesis to Evil and a vanguard in this adversarial action against such intentions. We owe this unrelenting vigilance to our families, friends, colleagues and especially to our patients. **SMA**



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