

assessments and recommendations to Clive Gowdy, permanent secretary of the Department of Health, and Richard Black, CEO of the Trust, shortly after returning to the states.

In their initial letter, Bemak and Conyne stated:

■ Youth suicide programs are linked to the many associated issues particular to Northern Ireland that cause the higher rates of youth suicide as compared globally to other countries.

■ Prevention programs must have a greater emphasis in funding and delivery. Current programming focuses overwhelmingly on intervention and crises.

■ Facilitate inter-agency coordination in programming.

■ Develop a protocol for sharing "best practices" that address youth suicide prevention and intervention programs

■ Strengthen university counseling and social work programs linkage with the actual work in the community.

■ Expand public awareness campaigns so that there is a continuum of services.

■ Develop a comprehensive youth mentoring program, with youth and community leaders helping other youth.

■ Facilitate more systematic intra-agency dialogue about sectarian issues facing youth, families and communities.

■ Facilitate greater cross-community communication between sectarian groups. Youth suicide is a problem common to all groups in Northern Ireland and could be a significant potential bridge for opening up dialogue. It is our strong impression that the intra-sectarian and inter-sectarian conflict has great bearing on the high rates of youth suicide and therefore requires critical attention to the reduction of future youth suicides.

"There are a number of crisis intervention programs going on, and there are some excellent programs. On the other hand, our sense was that there needed to be a greater emphasis on prevention in terms of delivery and funding," Bemak said, adding that they also recommended that a comprehensive mentoring

program be established, as well as peer support services.

"A lot of what is going on in terms of Protestant and Catholic relations in Northern Ireland is conflict mediation and conflict resolution, and some of it has taken and some of it hasn't. Bob and I, both having strong backgrounds in group work, wanted to talk about bringing together the two sectors in some kind of process intervention, where we could begin to open up dialogue rather than only mediate conflict."

In response, Black provided a reply letter on behalf of the Trust to the counselors that addressed the aforementioned concerns and suggestions. Black gave additional information on the government's efforts and additional programs to prevent youth suicides. In his letter, he said, "The emphasis that you have placed on prevention programs is entirely in accord with our own thinking. ... Your report is already influencing our strategy for promotion of the emotional and psychological well-being of our young people."

However, the entire letter was not so gracious. Black disagreed that the sectarian conflicts are at the root of this problem. He wrote, "You have been forthright in addressing the issue of intra-sectarian and inter-sectarian conflict, and it is only right that I should be just as straightforward in responding. I have some difficulty with what you write. I am not convinced that we can assume only a causal relationship between the conflict and our suicide problem. The experience (that we acquired through) many years has helped us to identify the conflict as a very important part of the context for the suicide problem and many other mental health issues. However, our analysis of the suicides and suicidal behavior suggests that this is a most complex issue and that there are often a whole range of factors involved, including family relationships, unemployment, lack of hope and poor self-esteem."

Black said that the Trust's first responsibility is to deliver treatment, care and support within each segregated population. He

said the conflict is a factor they have to consider when delivering services, and they address those issues through a range of community development approaches in each community and across communities. "This includes interagency initiatives to support displaced families, support for interface projects. ... The Trust is active in all these initiatives, but it is not our remit to lead on the resolution of the conflict, which, as you appreciate, is fundamentally located in the political realm."

Civil clashes are happening throughout the world and the problems sparked by these conflicts are the same regardless of where it is taking place.

"It's relevant — it's not just Northern Ireland. This is happening in other areas of the world — South Africa, Israel, Palestine — the sense of despair and hopelessness is related," said Bemak.

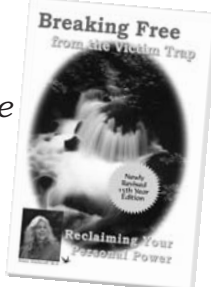
For more information on this collaborative suicide prevention project or to view the complete letters, visit [www.childrenofireland.us](http://www.childrenofireland.us). ■

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