

Room for a view

On pepper spray and civil disobedience

The ancient city of Madurai in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, has two main attractions that contrast starkly in atmosphere and effect. The extravagant Sri Meenakshi Temple, in the heart of the old city, houses a vibrant bazaar of colours, fragrances and sounds, more reminiscent of a carnival than of a temple. Entering, you are simultaneously greeted by vendors, blessed by elephants and adorned by the nimble fingers of sweet women who lace strings of jasmine through your hair; these tickle your neck and swish perfume each time you turn your head to take in the confectionary of multicoloured statues that decorate every nook and cranny of the festive building. In contrast, the Gandhi museum, located on the outskirts of the city, a fair taxi ride away in the tranquil palace of Rani Mangammal, is more reminiscent of a temple than of a museum, offering solitude and instilling reverence. It houses an account of India's struggle for independence and exhibits Mahatma Gandhi's contributions to this effort, culminating with a display of the garment he was wearing when assassinated and a transcript of his utterance to God in that moment when he realized that his fate, and India's, were sealed.

Gandhi's peaceful approach to civil disobedience, *satyagraha*, combined a demonstration of truth (*satya*) with firmness (*agraha*). The strength of *satyagraha* was soulful, not brutal, and its weapons — humility, patience and purity — resided in the individual and were expressed through self-control. Through *satyagraha* one vindicated the truth by inflicting suffering not on one's opponent but on oneself; fasting was the most extreme act of nonviolence. It was Gandhi's hope and belief that through the dissident's patience and sympathy the opponent might be weaned from error and catch a glimpse of truth.

To lose sight either of one's objec-

tive or of one's opponent during an act of civil disobedience reduces the effectiveness of this act. As articulated in a manual on civil disobedience posted on the Web by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power),¹ the aim of nonviolent civil disobedience is communication. To effectively practise peaceful protest, the protestor must believe that his or her objectives are fair and must be in a position to communicate this directly to the opposing individual. It is important during this communication that the protestor maintain eye contact with the front-line opponent as much as possible in an attempt to engage his soul rather than his brute.

This is difficult to do when the opponent is hidden beneath riot gear (or suited behind wire fencing) and when pepper and tear gas are being sprayed into one's face — which is probably why these agents are used as often as they are to squelch social protest. The active ingredient in pepper spray is oleoresin capsicum, an oily extract of hot peppers that targets pain receptors and causes neurogenic inflammation, short-term pain, erythema, blepharospasm, tearing and blurred vision — most of which resolves within one hour after exposure. When administered in an experimental setting, the effects are fairly benign. Among 47 law-enforcement officers who willingly subjected themselves to pepper spray, 21% experienced punctate epithelial erosions, but none suffered corneal abrasions.² These results differ from those of a retrospective study of 100 patients who presented to a jail ward emergency area after pepper spray exposure. Seven cases of corneal abrasion were identified among these patients,³ which suggests

that corneal abrasion is not a rare outcome when pepper spray is administered outside the confines of a study protocol.

For the most part the antiglobalization protestors who attended the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in April anticipated the assault of pepper spray, tear gas and what-not and protected themselves. Determined that we not lose sight of occupational health standards and environmental protection issues as the political leaders of the Americas extolled the economic benefits of free trade, the protestors draped their faces with vinegar-

soaked kerchiefs and donned swim goggles and sunglasses to keep lines of communication, and their eyes, open. They succeeded in drawing international media attention and in communicating civilian concerns to our political leaders. Yet, in the aftermath of the excitement it appears that any change of vision experienced by either side as a result of the Summit protest has been little more than transitory. Normal vision has been restored, an outcome consistent with the nature and design of agents of crowd control.

Erica Weir

Dr. Weir is an associate editor of *CMAJ*.

References

1. ACT UP AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Civil disobedience training: nonviolent response to personal violence. Available: www.actupnv.org/documents/CDdocuments/NVResponse.html (accessed 2001 June 13).
2. Zollman T, Bragg R, Harrison D. Clinical effects of oleoresin capsicum on the human cornea and conjunctiva. *Ophthalmology* 2000;107:2186-9.
3. Brown L, Takeuchi D, Challoner K. Corneal abrasions associated with pepper spray exposure. *Am J Emerg Med* 2000;18:271-2.



Art Explosion