10th anniversary of the Montreal massacre
A reflection

by Pat Quinn, P.Eng., President

December 6 will mark the 10th anniversary of the murder of 14 women–12 of them engineering students–at École Polytechnique in Montreal. A week of memorial events will be held in Montreal to recognize the anniversary, with a focus on eliminating present-day violence. This is highly appropriate, but discouraging in the context of how little has changed.

I lived and worked in Montreal, have a daughter in the same age group as the young women who lost their lives, and feel deeply for the families and friends who lost so much that sad day 10 years ago. The murders on December 6, 1989, have had, and continue to have, a profound effect on my life, sparking a desire to see change not only in the engineering profession, but also in society in general.

My personal feelings on this issue make this a difficult column for me to write. I should also point out that my comments are not meant to represent the general opinions of either male or female engineers. They are my own personal views.

Public debate

In the months following the tragedy in Montreal, there was considerable debate over what conclusions could be drawn from it. People questioned whether this was the act of a madman, which could be viewed as an isolated event having nothing to do with the general issue of violence against women. They also asked whether there was any significance to the engineering connection, and whether anything could have been done to prevent it.

Looking back from a 10-year perspective, I think that society's and engineering's answers were that this was an isolated event, that there was no significance to the engineering connection, and little could have been done to prevent it. I believe that these answers are an indication of why the level of violence against women remains unacceptably high and why so little has been done to prevent it.

Recent incidents and statistics illustrate the depth and breadth of violence directed against women in our society. Women are murdered at a rate of about two a week in Canada. Since the murders in Montreal, more than 1000 women have lost their lives to violence–not to mention the many who just disappear. Harassment, stalking, threatening behavior and assault are pandemic. Shelters for battered women are overcrowded and underfunded. It's not enough to say that violence won't be tolerated. I believe that what's sorely needed is a call for, and a commitment to, change.

I think we need to ask ourselves this question: If a man walked into a Canadian university today, armed and intending to separate women and kill them, what would be different from what it was in 1989? Are we any better equipped to prevent a similar tragedy from occurring? What preventive measures have been taken, or could we take?

Technical solutions

Perhaps looking at the strategies used to deal with another public safety issue–the number of people killed in police chases–can help us think creatively about solutions to the issue of violence against women. The number of fatalities resulting from police chases is significantly reduced by combining improved policies and procedures with an appropriate use of technology. New police guidelines and consideration of stiffer penalties for people who don't stop for the police (which would prevent chases in the first place) are working together with improved communication techniques, devices that stop cars, and the use of helicopters as part of the chase strategy. Most people would likely agree that these are reasonable ways to mitigate the problem.

A similar combination of solutions can be brought to bear to protect women and men from random or specific violence. As engineers, already involved in other aspects of public safety, we have a recognized part to play. In fire safety, for example, we have been at the forefront of technologies that save lives, such as alarms, and sprinkler and monitoring systems that prevent or minimize the impact of fires. With our technical leadership skills and practical ability to solve problems, we can make a major contribution to reducing violence and violent crimes.

There are many, complex factors underlying the issue of violence in society. Technology can't address them all by itself. But, just as technology can be applied to help protect the public from fires or from police chases, it can also be used to protect the public from violence. This means that engineers have a role to play. To be effective, that role requires us to be open to reflection, and to the new perspectives and solutions that reflection brings. It also requires that we be willing to take solutions from ideas to implementation. Collectively, we are a powerful force for action.

Input welcome

I hope to spark debate on this issue, and I welcome your input on what the profession can do to prevent violence. Please, write to me personally, through PEO, or share your thoughts with your colleagues through letters to the editor. ◆