Impacts of Workplace Bullying on Staff Psychological Wellness in Institutions of Higher Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at exploring workplace bullying as psychological violence in institutions of higher learning in general and among the academic staff of the National University of Lesotho in particular. The purpose this study was to determine the influence of workplace bullying on staff psychological wellness. The findings of the study highlighted the following impacts of workplace bullying on staff psychological wellness: negative self-image, negative emotions, low energy level, and minimal self-motivation. The methodology for this study was the qualitative research approach, with an overarching intention of making meaning out of the meaning made by interviewees of their experiences related to workplace bullying. Data for this study was collected through a semi-structured interview on twenty academic staff members of the aforementioned institution. Data analysis was done through the iterative and inductive methods of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), for the generation of an integrated narrative of interviewees' meaning making of their experiences of workplace bullying.The researcher is of the opinion that workplace bullying as directly or vicariously experienced by interviewed staff of the National University of Lesotho can be coined 'man's inhumanity to man'. Workplace bullying can be said to be directly or indirectly linked to the following staff casualties, which coincided with the university restructuring programme: stroke, heart attacks, brain hemorrhage, and unknown numbers of staff members with dangerous levels of high blood pressure, insomnia, burnout, emotional imbalance, family collapse, paranoia, and depression.

Keywords: *university restructuring; negative self-image; negative emotions; low energy level; minimal self-motivation.*

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed a growth in studies reporting negative effects on the health and wellness of targets of bullying at work (Yildirim&Yildirim, 2007: 1450; Vaillancourt, Hymel& McDougall, 2003: 159; Tehrani, 2004: 359).Research by the United Nations-sponsored International Labor Office (Sperry, 2009: 166) reports that the effects of workplace bullying have reached epidemic levels in several countries and that the global cost of such workplace violence is enormous, costing untold millions of dollars in losses from medical expenses, absenteeism, and sick leave (Chappell& Di Martino, 2006: 150). The ILO (Sperry, 2009: 166) also reports that professions that were once regarded as sheltered from workplace bullying and mobbing (e.g., teaching, social services, library services, and health care) are now experiencing increasing acts of such abusiveness in both developed and developing countries (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006: 150).

While the organizational costs of workplace bullying are typically measured in financial terms, the costs borne by targets include negative psychological and physical outcomes, aswell as effects of workplace bullying that are employment-related (Einarsen&Mikkelsen, 2003: 134). Workplace bullying has been found to be strongly associated with lowered psychological wellness, increased levels of stress, low self-esteem, anxiety, concentration disorders, chronic fatigue, depression, anger and the experience of psychosomatic symptoms (Einarsen&Mikkelsen, 2003: 134; Vartia, 2003: 67; Niedhammer, David,Degioanni, Drummond & Philip, 2009: 1215). Prolonged exposure to negative acts may also lead individuals to engage in behaviors to cope, such as alcohol use, which has negative effects on health (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty &Freels, 2001: 360).

For Von Bergen (2006: 25), Chitale (2008: 15), and Zogby International (2007), workplace bullying in universities has the following effects

with deleterious impacts also on relations with students, staff and management: stress; depression and suicidal thoughts; reduced self-esteem; self-blame; phobias; sleep disturbances; digestive and musculoskeletal problems; social isolation; family and financial problems; post-traumatic stress disorders. Fogg (2008: 10), Von Bergen, Zavaletta and Soper (2006: 25), Tepper (2000: 182), Duffy and Ferrier (2003: 227) have highlighted the following impacts of workplace bullying on departments in particular and universities in general: stress; drop in productivity; loss of credibility; dysfunctional work context; lower efficiency; high sick leave dues; high turnover; high costs of severance packages; physical violence; conflict between work exigencies and family life; low organizational commitment; high suspicion and mutual distrust; exponential increase in medical compensations and costs of workplace litigations; sabotage; poor client and customer services

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was chosen to guide the research design and methodology of this research because it facilitated the description of workplace bullying as psychological violence experienced by academic staff of the National University of Lesotho. Secondly, qualitative research described the world of workplace bullying and staff psychological wellness as personal experiences through 'natural language'. Thirdly, qualitative reseacrh increased the probability that the individual provides his or her own version, view, account, and expression of their own 'world' of workplace bullying. Lastly, qualitative research provided a framework for an in-depth understanding of the meaning that individuals made of their original and authentic experiences related to workplace bullying as psychological violence.The purposive sample for this study comprised twenty members of the academic staff in the National University of Lesotho. There are two reasons why purposeful sampling was chosen for this study. Firstly, the choice of purposive sampling was in respect of the qualitative principle of appropriateness, i.e. having participants who are articulate, reflective, and willing to share their experiences with the researcher (Morse, 1991:127). Secondly, purposive sampling was based on choosing participants who represent information-rich cases from whom the researcher could learn much in relation to the issues under study

(Patton, 1990:169). Twenty academic staff members of the National University of Lesotho constituted the purposive sample on which the semi-structured interview was administered. Among the respondents were two females, eighteen males, in the categories of three associate professors, nine senior lecturers, and eight lecturers. The ages of the respondents range from thirty three (33) to fifty five (55) years.

Data was collected through a semi-structured interview and data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which seeks to enable the researcher to understand how individuals make sense out of their major life experiences using a double hermeneutic. IPA was chosen because it elicits from respondents' accounts, a detailed and "substantially rich" depiction of the phenomena under study, from phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic perspectives (Eatough& Smith, 2008: 11). Secondly, IPA favors the use of semi-structured phenomenological interviews for data collection and highlighting of potentially grey areas which structured and rigid formats will not adequately uncover (Eatough& Smith, 2008: 11). Thirdly, data analysis using IPA focuses on making in-depth appraisal of the phenomena of workplace bullying and psychological wellness through its triple pronged methods of analysis, that is phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic perspectives (Smith et al., 2009: 11).

RESULTS

As seen on table 1.1, there are four sub-themes derived from the impact of workplace bullying on staff psychological wellness. These include:

- negative self-image
- negative emotions
- low energy level
- Minimal self motivation.

Sub-Theme One: Negative Self-Image

For this researcher, based on participants' responses, negative self-image is the perception an individual has that he or she is worthless, of little or no account, and the general belittling of one's potentials by one's self. A negative self-image literally disdains oneself, wishing one were something, someplace or someone else. Excerpts on negative self-image are presented in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: *Excerpts on negative self-image*

Line /page / speaker	Quotes
L 16 / 302 / Albert	'I am less creative and I am losing confidence in myself.'
L 22-24 / 317 / Nero	'I get the feeling that I am not really valued. I know I could even leave NUL without anyone being bothered by the fact. That is how much I feel dispensable. My self-confidence is at an all-time low…'
L 73-74 / 322 / Raul	'When I am constantly reminded that my programme is not marketable, I tend to lose confidence in myself, and to feel worthless and unappreciated.'

Negative self-image is quite instrumental as a factor which influences psychological wellness following experiences of workplace bullying, because for the researcher the former acts as a vital factor which will subsequently influence how workplace bullying is perceived and managed.

Sub-Theme Two: Negative Emotions

Negative emotions from this study are related to negative feelings like fear, anger, stress, anxiety, despair, and impulsiveness. Table 1.2 highlights issues of negative emotions among our participants.

Table 1.2: *Excerpts on negative emotions*

Line /page / speaker	Quotes
Line 15 / 302 / Albert	'I experience very high stress levels.'
L 14- 16 / 303 / Bill	'Working relations have gone sour. At times colleagues don't greet one another. Some who have clashed through workplace bullying experiences bear grudges, thereby poisoning the work environment. The tense atmosphere increases stress levels and generates a vicious circle. Constant thinking about interpersonal issues leads to sustainable anxiety.'
L 37-38 / 304 / Camara	'No one is stable, there is emotional suffering, mental anxiety…'
L 42-43 / 304 / Camara	'I am permanently stressed up with accompanying headaches, stomach problems, inexplicable pains and insomnia.'
L 18-19 / 306 / David	'workplace bullying…creates in me a latent, negative paranoid mood'
L 18-20 / 309 / George	'Due to drastic staff reduction, my workload pressure has quadrupled with negative impacts on my stress levels and physical resilience.'
L 28-30 / 311 / Ivo	'I am uncertain about my future. I am even scared. I am unhappy, frustrated and "helpless." Since things are not done transparently and my opinion doesn't count, I have lost hope, I am afraid, anxious, and my morale is low.'
L 12-13 / 313 / Jacqueline	'I experience negative interactions with colleagues. My stress levels are high. My family harmony is affected. I have a heightened sense of insecurity and uncertainty.'
L 15-17 / 315 / Luther	'I am literally obsessed by the fact that I could be among those to be retrenched. I have the sense of being "stifled and restrained from total positive self-expression"…'
L 11-12 / 316 / Mani	'My heavy workload is stressing me up. I am feeling "out of sorts" because poor communication creates imbalance between job description, staff situation, and overall expectations.'
L 22-29 / 317 / Nero	'I am filled with permanent anxiety, fear, and despair by the rumors that flood the campus on a daily basis. I get the feeling that I am not really valued. My self-confidence is at an all-time…my family is stressed and this in turn stresses me.'
L 30-36 / 318 / Opondi	"I have recently become impatient and nervous with students when they make normal mistakes. I even bark at them. I also get impatient with my daughter and wife at home. I am constantly ruminating about the future of my family: "Am I going to be amongst those who will be retrenched?" "What will be the future of my family, particularly my daughter?" "If I get retrenched now, how will I raise this child, especially to provide for her education?" The anxiety is killing me. '
L 25-26 / 320 / Paul	'I am frustrated but remain tied down by heavy workload and pressurizing deadlines, thereby increasing my stress levels.'
L 13-14 / 321 / Quarant	'I feel like I have been alienated from management. I no longer have any confidence in management. I am permanently stressed…'
L 78-80 / 322 / Raul	'I am just totally frustrated. I am constantly worried about the fate of our only national university, whether I am there tomorrow or not; I am like dying inside, seeing our national university reduced to rubble.'
L 22-23 / 325 / Samuel	'My stress level went up and I am now suffering from high blood pressure.'
L 8 / 326 / Thomas	'I am usually depressed.'

Negative emotions experienced by the participants of this study are noted seventeen times in the excerpts of Table 1.2. Negative emotions represent the highest form of negative influence of workplace bullying on the psychological wellness of the participants of this study. For this researcher, the aforementioned indicates that workplace bullying has a profound and destabilizing effect on victims' emotional wellness.

Table 1.3: *Excerpts on low energy level*

Line / page / speaker	Quotes
L 18 / 310 / Hans	'I have little enthusiasm, motivation, [or] energy'
L 15-17 / 315 / Luther	"I am de-motivated as concerns harnessing the necessary…energy, concentration and commitment to carry out my duties. This fixation drains off my mental, emotional and physical energies, and I am left devitalized.'
L 38-40 / 318 / Opondi	'I am always tired, but this cannot be attributed to physical fatigue. I am psychologically drained.'
L 21-24 / 320 / Paul	'I lack energy to perform well in class. I mark one script for a very long time. I just feel dry. I have no stamina to plan for the future. I just feel stuck. Low energy levels make me uncertain as to whether to search for opportunities out of campus.'
L 25 / 325 / Samuel	'I have a sense of constant fatigue, de-vitalization, and deflation.'

The five excerpts of items on low energy level highlight the fact that following the high incidence of negative emotions through workplace bullying, it is more or less logical to expect victims of the latter to feel and think they are losing energy, thereby becoming incapacitated to perform their professional activities.

Sub-Theme Three: Low Energy Level

Low energy level for the participants of this study has connotations of thoughts, feelings of being drained, that is emptied of vitality, and devitalized, with subsequent negative impacts on motivation. Low energy level also means a situation where the individual has little or no drive, no physical, verbal, and psychological ethos to effectively perform their prescribed duties. Table 1.3 highlights participants' experiences of low energy levels.

Sub-Theme Four: Minimal Self-Motivation

The outcome of negative self-image, negative emotions, and low energy level seems to be minimal self-motivation since the individual is squeezed dry of all intrinsic and self-initiated creative and effective action momentum. Table 1.4 contains excerpts on minimal self-motivation of participants.

Table 1.4: *Excerpts on minimal self-motivation*

Line / page / speaker	Quotes
L 16 / 302 / Albert	'I am generally de-motivated.'
L 37-39 / 304 / Camara	'Workplace bullying in NUL impacts directly on my family life. No one is stable, there is emotional suffering, mental anxiety, with direct impacts on my academic performance and commitment.'
L 39-40 / 304 / Camara	'Through … economic bullying … my intellectual stimulation and commitment plummeted.'
L 49-51 / 304 / Camara	'Through moral and psychological torture my intellectual stimulation is long dead. I have no more motivation to research, publish and even seek promotion because the current workplace is toxic, poisoned thanks to bullying.'
L 18-20 / 306 / David	'As an expatriate it is easy for me to interpret workplace bullying as being discriminatory and motivated by my origin. This negatively affects my work output, by lowering motivation based on the bullying interaction with others.'
L 12-15 / 308 / Francis	'My zeal to be productive is dampened. I am emotionally and intellectually de-motivated.'
L 15-18 / 310 / Hans	'I am de-motivated through an uncertain personal and family future. My research productivity has dropped drastically because of no funds for conferences and research. I have little enthusiasm, motivation, energy, or even interest in teaching students.'
L 20-22 / 314 / Kate	'My morale is very low. I have a sense of losing direction. I have a feeling of uncertainty and no zeal to carry out duties.'
L 14-15 / 315 / Luther	'I am de-motivated as concerns harnessing the necessary and normal time, energy, concentration and commitment to carry out my duties. I have the sense of being stifled and restrained from total positive self-expression.'

L 10 / 316 / Mani	'My motivation is hard hit…'
L 36-40 / 318 / Opondi	My PhD work is suffering from this situation. I have no stamina to read and concentrate. I am no longer able to meet with deadlines as I used to in my honors and masters levels.'
L 20-21 / 320 / Paul	'I am de-motivated in the carrying out of my normal teaching and marking of students' tests and examinations.'
L 15 / 321 / Quarant	'I am very de-motivated.'
L 78 / 322 / Raul	'…I have given up.'
L 24-25 / 325 / Sam	'I feel de-motivated… I have a sense of constant fatigue, de-vitalization, and deflation.'
L 8-9 / 326 / Thomas	'I lack of motivation. I have no enthusiasm in carrying out my duties.'

Concerning theme four, which is 'workplace bullying and psychological wellness', negative emotions and minimal self-motivation have the highest number of recorded items in relation to the consequences of workplace bullying on participants' psychological wellness, being seventeen and sixteen respectively.

The researcher thinks that while negative self-image and low energy level constitute the 'base' of the curve of the impact of workplace bullying on psychological wellness, negative emotions and minimal self-motivation are the 'peak' effects of bullying on psychological wellness for the participants of this study.

CONTRASTED KEY ELEMENTS IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND WORKPLACE BULLYING IN NUL

Table 1.5: *Key elements in positive psychology and workplace bullying*

No	Key elements in positive psychology	Key elements in workplace bullying
1	The science of optimal human functioning'	The principle of minimal human functioning
2	Studies human success	Highlights human weaknesses and limitations
3	Focuses on positive subjective experiences like happiness and well-being as well as positive human characteristics such as strengths and virtues	Concentrates on negative subjective experiences like fear and despair, and on negative human characteristics like insensitivity and vices
4	It is not just interested in individuals but in how group structures such as organizations, families or cultures can induce positive emotion and encourage the use of strengths	It portrays how organizations can induce negative emotion and minimize the use of strengths

From Table 1.5, it can be seen that workplace bullying contrary to positive psychology which studies principles of optimal human functioning, success and happiness through maximization of strengths and virtues, only helps in exacerbating negative experiences and characteristics like fear, anxiety, and uncertainty among participants. In the case of the participants of this study, workplace bullying negatively impacts on their psychological wellness by inducing negative emotions which de-motivate them from using their strengths, since they are drained of positive energy. The combination of negative emotions and low energy level can be

DISCUSSION

While considering the consequences of workplace bullying on the psychological wellness of interviewed staff of the National University of Lesotho, it dawned on the researcher that the consequences of workplace bullying are in total contradistinction to the proposed elements, precepts, principles, and values of positive psychology. This salient fact makes the researcher to attempt to say that workplace bullying is the epitome of "anti-positive psychology" as will be seen below, through the rubrics of key elements of positive psychology, the negative brain, the role of positive emotion, the psychological paradox, and flow.

seen in two interviewees of the present study. Nero says:

I am filled with permanent anxiety, fear, and despair by the rumors that flood the campus on a daily basis. I get the feeling that I am not really valued. My self-confidence is at an all-time…my family is stressed and this in turn stresses me. (cf. table 4.15).

Hans feel low on energy as follows:

'I have little enthusiasm, motivation, or energy.' (cf. table 4.16).

The Negative Brain

Contrary to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000: 75) who argue that the brain generally tends to be negative from a survival and evolutionary perspective, workplace bullying for the researcher seems to reinforce the prioritization of negative information. In other words, the persistent negative acts of workplace bullying experienced by participants intensify their sense of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty concerning the future, which effectively "fixates" their brains at the default position of worrying. In other words participants concentrate on gloomy thoughts arising from the negative acts of workplace bullying thereby maximizing the role of the 'negative brain.' The experience of Opondi exemplifies fixation on negative emotions as a result of workplace bullying. He expresses his experience as follows:

I have recently become impatient and nervous with students when they make normal mistakes. I even bark at them. I also get impatient with my daughter and wife at home. I am constantly ruminating about the future of my family: "Am I going to be amongst those who will be retrenched?" "What will be the future of my family, particularly my daughter?" "If I get retrenched now, how will I raise this child, especially to provide for her education?" The anxiety is killing me.

Participants' fixation on the 'negative brain' leads to 'psychic entropy' (Frederickson & Losada, 2005: 680), i.e. the paralyzing of attention by the negative consequences of workplace bullying. As seen in Table 1.5, contrary to the prescriptions of positive psychology workplace bullying instead minimizes human functioning, highlights weaknesses, concentrates on negative subjective experiences, and reveals how organizations can induce negative emotions through workplace bullying.

The Role of Positive Emotion

Frederickson and Losada (2005: 680) argue that negative emotions narrow people's perspective and keep them focused on the specific problems at hand. Positive emotions on the contrary build personal resources which enhance effective coping and relationships with others. For Frederickson and Losada (2005: 680), positive emotions broaden attentional focus and promote resilience for better stress management.

Furthermore, participants who experience negative emotions as a result of workplace bullying, confirm Frederickson et al., 2005 thesis that negative emotions narrow people's perspective. This can be seen in the experiences of two interviewees of the present study, i.e. Camara and Jacqueline. Camara says:

No one is stable, there is emotional suffering, mental anxiety...I am permanently stressed up with accompanying headaches, stomach problems, inexplicable pains and insomnia.

Jacqueline's experience is as follows:

I experience negative interactions with colleagues. My stress levels are high. My family harmony is affected. I have a heightened sense of insecurity and uncertainty.

Negative emotions of participants can be categorized as follows:

- Overriding negative emotions (fear, free-floating anxiety, frustration, despair, latent animosity, etc), negative moods (uncertainty, de-motivation, dampened zeal, paranoia, suspicion, etc), negative attitudes (sense of alienation, helplessness, worthlessness, lack of confidence, feeling belittled.

- Frederickson's argument that negative emotions narrow people's perspective and keep them focused on the specific problem in hand (e.g. retrenchment scare of participants) is confirmed by this study in which participants are constantly obsessed and permanently stressed by the negative consequences of workplace bullying.

- In other words, when participants experience negative emotions they have less 'behavioral flexibility' (Frederickson&Losada, 2005: 680) and this allows them to experience the 'depletion' of their 'intellectual and psychological resources'.

- Through experiencing negative emotions occasioned by workplace bullying, participants become less creative, experience negative workplace relationships, use negative coping strategies of avoidance and withdrawal, develop 'narrowed attentional focus' (Frederickson) which heightens bias (names calling), reinforces stress and diminishes resilience.

The Positive Psychology Paradox

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000: 23), there is a core paradox in Positive

Psychology, which emphasizes that though humans easily become fixated in negative brain mode, it is only through positive emotions that they can thrive physically, emotionally, mentally, socially and professionally. Workplace bullying on the contrary as experienced by the participants of this study 'fixates' them to negativity, develops negative emotions, compromises psychological wellness, relationships, intellectual and psychological resources. Luther and Raul depict the aforementioned relationship between workplace bullying and psychological illness.

Luther says:

> *I am literally obsessed by the fact that I could be among those to be retrenched. I have the sense of being "stifled and restrained from total positive self-expression.*

Raul says:

> *'I am frustrated but remain tied down by heavy workload and pressurizing deadlines, thereby increasing my stress levels.'*

The end result of this negative impact of workplace bullying on participants is to maximize negativity and 'freeze existence' into an unfulfilling 'vicious circle' of frustration, stress, de-motivation and helplessness. This contradiction between 'flow' in positive psychology and the consequences of workplace bullying is shown in Table 1.6.

COMPARING FLOW AND WORKPLACE BULLYING

Table 1.6: *Comparing 'flow' and workplace bullying*

No	The 8 ingredients of flow in positive psychology	The 8 ingredients of 'being stuck' in workplace bullying in NUL
1	Involved in tasks that we have a good chance of completing.	Disengagement from our routine tasks
2	We are able to concentrate fully on activities	Permanent distraction by intrusion of dark thoughts of foreboding in relation to an uncertain future
3	Tasks have clear goals	The goals of restructuring are not unclear
4	There is immediate feedback on how well we are doing in our tasks	There is information blackout
5	Involvement is 'deep but effortless' and this 'removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life'	There is disengagement and permanent worrying, which 'obsesses awareness with the worries and frustrations of everyday life'
6	There is a sense of exercising control over our actions	There is a sense of helplessness
7	Concern for the self 'disappears' but paradoxically our 'sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over'	Concern for self is 'paramount' but paradoxically the 'sense of self weakens with permanent stress and ceaseless worrying'
8	We lose our normal sense of time – we can feel either that it has speeded up (and passed quickly) or slowed down	Sense of time is predominant in mind, becoming harassing, inelastic, and invasive

An important concept in Positive Psychology is 'flow'. For Csikszentmihalyi (2000: 23), flow is important because it enables control over consciousness, leads to holistic development of people, reinforces psychological ethos, and enables people to have optimal experience. Workplace bullying on the other hand as seen in Table 1.6, impacts on the psychological wellness of participants in the following ways which are contrary to the principles of 'flow':

- Participants have little or no mastery over their quasi-permanent obsession with a scary future

- Their 'psychological capital' is depleted

- They have a 'diminished experience'

- Participants have a sense of disengagement from their prescribed duties

- Their lives appear meaningless.

CONCLUSION

All participants are of the opinion that workplace bullying is lethal, highly damaging and disruptive of their psychological wellness, in one form or the other. With very few exceptions, respondents indicate that they are severely affected by workplace bullying at the levels of stress, emotional balance, intellectual stimulation, motivation, self-esteem, family life, staff relations and general resilience. This is confirmed by the fact that researchers think that the influence of workplace bullying on employee wellness involves literally all aspects

of human functioning, which are physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and organizational (Jennifer, Cowie & Anaiadou, 2003: 491; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007: 850; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003: 43). Workplace bullying as experienced by directly or vicariously bullied NUL academic staff can be described as the epitome of 'man's inhumanity to man'. It exhibited the traits of 'violation of human rights', and acted as a veritable scourge on the psychological wellness of staff. During the peak period of intended university reforms in NUL which coincided with this study, there were the following staff casualties, which this researcher can definitely attest could be attributable to the onslaught of workplace bullying associated to NUL university reforms:

- Two stroke victims, one having recovered, while the other still has a paralyzed hand and a paralyzed leg

- One convalescing heart attack victim

- One brain hemorrhage which led to death

- Two deaths following cardiovascular arrests

- Unknown numbers of staff members with dangerous levels of high blood pressure, insomnia, burnout, emotional imbalance, family collapse, paranoia, depression, etc.

Like in other contexts, workplace bullying in NUL once more lived up to its sombre reputation as a 'destroyer' of psychological wellness and as one of the greatest 'scourges of the twenty first century'.

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