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Child Abuse and Neglect: Need for a Cohesive Effort of Physicians, Dental and Forensic Specialists

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ABSTRACT

Physicians, Dentists, and Nurses, form an important group in the society who can recognize abuse and neglect. Physicians receive minimal training in oral health and dental injury and disease and thus may not detect dental aspects of abuse or neglect as readily as they do child abuse and neglect involving other areas of the body. Traditional medical definitions of physical abuse are being challenged by intervening social legislation, judicial decisions, and administrative policies. This disagreement may pose a problem for the physicians, dentists in deciding when to report injuries as child abuse. This paper addresses these issues to recognize various signs and symptoms of Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) emphasizing the collaboration of physicians, dentists and forensic experts for prevention, detection, and treatment of these conditions.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Sexual Child Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Neglect, Physical Abuse

Introduction

For years, the tragic effects of abuse and neglect on the children against which it is perpetrated have been recognized.[1,2,3] This problem gained considerable impetus with the first reports of "battered child syndrome," in which children who suffered from repeated, severe trauma with patterns and histories that could be deciphered as occurring from inflicted abuse were identified.[3] Many publications[3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11] have since aided in determining patterns of specific abusive and non-abusive injuries and in deciding whether child abuse may be at least a reasonable suspicion, which is the criterion for initiating a child abuse report in most states.[3]

According to the World Report on Violence and Health[12], in the year 2000 an estimated 57,000 children under 15 years of age died by homicide. The homicide rates for children aged 0-4 years were over twice as high as rates among children aged 5-14 years. Head injuries are the most frequent cause of death, followed by abdominal injuries and suffocation. Many more children are subjected to non-fatal abuse and neglect. For instance, a risk assessment conducted for the 2002 World Report on Violence and Health showed that 8% of male and 25% of female children up to age 18 experience sexual abuse of some kind. Compared to non-abused individuals, adult victims of non-contact sexual abuse are four times more likely to suffer post traumatic stress disorder.