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Health and Human Trafficking: The role of health care professionals from prevention to aftercare

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Health and Human Trafficking: The role of health care professionals from prevention to aftercare

Katherine Welch, MD

Relentless

Importance of Health Care in TIP

- “Monitoring the health status of survivors of trafficking, the care they receive, and their access to medical services will be crucial in the future to hold signatories of the Convention [on the Rights of the Child] accountable and protect this vulnerable group.”¹
- “*Caring For Trafficked Persons*”, a comprehensive guide for health professionals, recognizes the dearth of data regarding health care and human trafficking²



Relentless

- Consultant to organizations that address abuse, trafficking, and exploitation
- Outreach clinics
- Develop protocols and procedures for organizations in developing countries
- Train aftercare staff
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Overview



- Direct Health Care
- Advocacy & Prevention
- Identification & Outreach
- Aftercare
- Research

Health Risks of TIP

- Baseline (prior to being trafficked) poor health conditions and/or underlying diseases
- Crowded & unsanitary living conditions
- Poor nutrition
- Social/cultural isolation & restriction
- Lack of access to health professionals for preventive services or treatment of illness
- Growth and development problems in children
- The factors above all contribute to the complexity of presentations and management due to these **compounding co-morbidities**

Difficulties in Providing Health Care

- Lack of knowledge about trafficked people's health needs
- Lack of proper specialists: e.g. forensics, mental health, well-trained interpreters
- Complex social and legal situation; what and where health care may take place; cross-disciplinary cooperation often complicated (differing objectives)
- Payment/cost issues
- Lack of access of health services by trafficked people due to restricted mobility or no knowledge of how to access services
- Long-term healing, chronic care, and follow up necessary, but difficult due to reasons stated above

The survivor perspective: voices from SE Asia

- Afraid of exposing his/her body to more strangers.
- Often have to endure multiple interviews and exams at various stages of care or for forensic purposes.
- Health professionals are not aware of psychosomatic illnesses – focus only on the body, therefore treatment falls short of need.
- Past traumatic experiences in a health care facility creates fear to return for exams/testing
- Health professionals refusing to allow support staff to be present with survivor during exams.

Identification

- The “frontline” of TIP exists everywhere and health providers can play an important role identifying and helping trafficked persons
- Health care is one of few arenas where the public has opportunity to interact with trafficked persons
- Health care professionals need to understand clues for identification
- In one study, 1 in 4 victims reported they had been in contact with a health care provider while being trafficked³

Prevention & Advocacy

- Be aware of TIP activity that may be occurring in your area, and how your patients may be affected
- Advocate for and participate in survivor services
- Participate on task force coalitions, community groups, and local organizations that address TIP issues
- Understand the what makes people vulnerable to being trafficked and address those root issues.
- Listen to survivors; listen to your patients

Outreach

- Volunteer at a clinic that serves vulnerable people – may impact the life of someone before they are trafficked, or you may meet someone already trapped in a dire situation.
- Homeless shelters, free clinics for indigent, shelters for victims of violence.



Aftercare services



- Offer health care services to those caring for trafficking survivors
- Provide trauma-informed and holistic services
- May help develop protocols, procedures, and evaluation & monitoring schemes
- Train aftercare staff in basic health care practices
- Forensic medicine practices (?)

Research

- ***“The business of public health is to take what is accepted and make it unacceptable.”***
 - Bill Foege, former director of CDC
- “NO DATA NO PROBLEM”
- Evidence informs interventions and programs (evidence-based medicine)
- Research can drive policies and generate funding

Barriers to data collection

- Access to survivors is limited and can be difficult to gain trust for honest responses
- Lack of understanding regarding research may affect organizations' willingness to cooperate in a study
- Uniform data collection not used; study methods may be substandard
- Failure among organizations to see mutual goals, unwilling to collaborate or share information
- Counter-trafficking organizations are not trained or funded to collect data; and may not know how to use the information
- Lack of funding for research; or grant process is prohibitively complex and daunting
- Location for study is not conducive; may even be hostile to data collection

Research ideas

- Screening, diagnosis and treatment of HPV/cervical dysplasia among women exploited as girls
- Mental health problems and effective treatments among different cultural groups in different settings
- Health problems of trafficked people
- Understand risk factors such as social, cultural, economic, immigration status; language barriers, etc
- Evaluation and monitoring of aftercare programs to ensure best practice and outcomes

Conclusion

- Human Trafficking has implications for individual as well as a public health
- Health care is central in the restoration of a trafficked person
- Human trafficking is a complex health, social, and legal issue – problems are compounded
- Health professionals and organizations, need to be involved in prevention, research, monitoring, developing treatment guidelines, and evaluation in addition to direct patient care
- Need funding, organizational support and political will to make global difference

Questions?

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