

A Prospective Study to Evaluate the Knowledge About Child Abuse amongst Family Physicians

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Abstract

Background: *Child neglect is a form of child maltreatment that has been found to exert deleterious consequences on such children in the long run. It can be diagnosed medically by its physical signs. If the diagnosis is not possible through medical means, it can be diagnosed by emotional and behavioural abnormalities. The aim of the present study is to evaluate and assess the knowledge possessed by physicians pertaining to child abuse.*

Materials & Methods: *The present prospective cross-sectional survey was conducted amongst 90 subjects to evaluate their knowledge about child abuse. They were provided with a pretested and pre designed proforma to assess their knowledge. The proforma consisted of questions that assessed their knowledge and attitude regarding child abuse. Questionnaires were sent to the physicians by mail, and it was in MCQ format. They were to fill the questionnaire and mail their responses back. Chi square and student t test were used as a test for significance. Probability value of less than 0.05 was considered significant.*

Results: *A total of 90 physicians were included in the present study out of which, 50 were males and 30 were females. There were 55.6% of the physicians who knew the most typical mark of child abuse. Only 41.1% subjects knew the most common symptom of child abuse. Rest 58.9% physicians didn't know the most common symptom. There were 61.1% (n=55) who knew that physicians should report a case of child abuse to child protection agencies.*

Conclusion: *The knowledge was not found to match the desirable standards. Many physicians are still unaware about the management and identification of child abuse cases.*

Key words: *Abuse, Child, Physician.*

Introduction

In the contemporary era, more preference and greater importance has been ascribed to violence against children. Violence amongst families and smaller social circles took all the attention and taboos of the past were discarded [1]. A great body of personnel is involved in the

investigation and reporting of maltreatment against children, and it includes children from different aspects of life like parents, teachers, volunteers, judges, prosecutors, child protection officers and police officers [2,3]. From the year 1960 onwards, more and more awareness has been drawn towards child neglect, even the physicians including paediatric surgeons, child psychiatrics, forensic experts, general practitioners are paying more attention towards this issue [4]. Child neglect is a type of child maltreatment that has most severe and serious consequences in the long run. It can be diagnosed medically by its physical signs. If the diagnosis is not possible medically, it can be done by emotional and behavioural abnormalities [3]. It is the chief duty of primary health care providers to educate and provide details about the both maternal and childcare

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services amongst the subjects. Therefore, it is the key role of these physicians to provide knowledge about child neglect and abuse [5].

A physician has various social responsibilities towards the society; therefore he/ she must be aware about the skills of identifying cases of child neglect and take appropriate and corrective actions against them. Educational and awareness programs on child abuse must be conducted frequently in order to make them cognizant of this sensitive issue[1,2]. The aim of the present study is to evaluate and assess the knowledge of physicians regarding child abuse.

Materials & Methods

The present prospective cross-sectional survey was conducted amongst 90 subjects to evaluate their knowledge about child abuse. They were provided with a pretested and pre designed proforma to assess their knowledge. The proforma consisted of questions that assessed their knowledge and attitude regarding child abuse. Questionnaires were sent to the physicians by mail and they were in MCQ format. They were to fill the questionnaire and mail the responses back. The first part consisted of questions related to the demographic and personal details of the subjects. In the second part, questions about the symptoms related to child abuse like marks, bruises and their significance were asked. In the third part, their attitude towards child abuse was assessed. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient value degree of 0.72 was

used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. Oral et al also assessed the validity of the questions regarding the knowledge of child neglect and abuse [6]. A pilot study was conducted amongst 10 physicians before the initiation of the study. The study was approved by the Institute’s ethical board and all the subjects were informed about the study, and a written consent was obtained from all. Confidentiality of the subjects was maintained. All the data was arranged in a tabulated forma and analysed using SPSS software. Chi square and student t test were used as a test for significance. Probability value of less than 0.05 was considered significant.

Results

A total of 90 physicians were included in the present study out of which, 50 were males and 30 were females. The mean age of the subjects was 32.3 years. There were 66 married subjects and 24 unmarried subjects (Graph 1).

Graph 1: Demographic details of the physicians

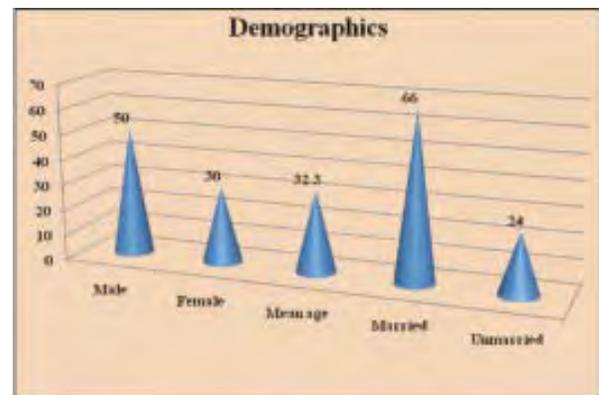


Table 1: Answer rates of physicians in response to questions about identification of child physical abuse

| S No | Sample Questions | Number of physicians answering correctly | Number of physicians answering incorrectly | p-value |
|------|--|--|--|---------|
| 1. | Most typical mark of child abuse | 50(55.6%) | 40(44.4%) | <0.05 |
| 2. | Most common symptom of child abuse | 37(41.1%) | 53(58.9%) | <0.05 |
| 3. | Most common body side manifested with signs of child abuse | 38(42.2%) | 52(57.8%) | <0.05 |
| 4. | Non-accidental fractures due to child physical abuse are most commonly seen in which age group | 34(37.8%) | 56(62.2%) | <0.05 |
| 5. | Echymoses in what body parts reminds physical abuse | 6(6.7%) | 84(93.3%) | <0.05 |

*: Significant

Table 1 shows the response of the physicians depicting the knowledge about child abuse. There were 55.6% of the physicians who knew the most typical mark of child abuse. Only 41.1% subjects knew the most common symptom of child abuse. Rest 58.9% physicians didn't know the most common symptom. There were 57.8% who didn't know the most common side manifested with signs of child abuse. There were only 37.8% physicians who knew about non accidental fractures and their age of occurrence. There were 6.7% (n=6) who had information about ecchymoses and their indication of physical

abuse. There was a significant difference in the knowledge as the p value was less than 0.05.

Table 2 shows information regarding the management of child abuse cases. There were 61.1% (n=55) who knew that physician should report a case of child abuse to child protection agencies. There were 54.4% (n=49) who knew that suspected cases of child abuse to the Child Protection Agencies but exemption should be given from legal procedure due to this allegation. Approximately 58.9% physicians should report all signs and symptoms of physical abuse should done using a standardized form.

Table 2: Answer rates of primary care physicians to the questions regarding to the management of a suspected child physical abuse case

| S No. | Questions | Number of physicians answering correctly | Number of physicians answering incorrectly | p-value |
|-------|--|--|--|---------|
| 1. | Physician should report a child abuse suspected case to Child Protection Agencies | 55(61.1%) | 35(38.9%) | <0.05 |
| 2. | Physicians should reportsuspectedcases of childabuse to the ChildProtectionAgenciesbut exemption should be given from legal procedure due to this allegation | 49(54.4%) | 41(45.6%) | <0.05 |
| 3. | Reporting of all signs and symptomsof physical abuseshould done using a standardizedform | 53(58.9%) | 37(41.1%) | <0.05 |
| 4. | Implementation of national educational program for prevention ofchild abuse shouldbe done | 52(57.8%) | 38(42.2%) | >0.05 |

Discussion

By definition, child abuse and neglect is any recent act on the part of parents or caretakers which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation [7]. Various factors are associated with child abuse and neglect like low income[8], lack of maternal education etc[9]. From the present study, we have seen that most of the physicians do not have adequate knowledge about the identification and management of child abuse cases. In a study conducted by Fung et al amongst 368 subjects, 38% doctors had a personal definition of child abuse. According to majority of the physicians, having sex, burning child, tying child and various other forms

of sexual advances were not acceptable and abusive. According to 80% of the subjects, there should be reporting of the child abuse. There was more response of candidates towards physical and sexual abuse rather than emotional abuse. From their study, the authors reached the conclusion that there is a need to formalize the definition of child abuse [10]. As per the present study, there were 55.6% of the physicians who knew the most typical mark of child abuse. Only 41.1% subjects knew the most common symptom of child abuse. Rest 58.9% physicians didn't know the most common symptom. There were

57.8% who didn't know the most common side manifested with signs of child abuse. There were only 37.8% physicians who knew about non accidental fractures and their age of occurrence. There were 6.7% (n=6) who had information about ecchymoses and their indication of physical abuse. There was a significant difference in the knowledge as the p value was less than 0.05. According to a study conducted by Açiket al[11] knowledge and awareness of 266 primary health care doctors were assessed out of which only 175 participated in the survey. It was seen that there is a lack of adequate knowledge amongst the physicians regarding child abuse. According to them; there is an exigent need to provide adequate knowledge and awareness amongst the physicians regarding child abuse so that they are at a better position to diagnose cases of child abuse and neglect. A study was conducted by Kennedy RDet al[12], to evaluate the knowledge and attitude of the primary health care physicians about elderly maltreatment. The study included a total of 250 family physicians and 250 general internists. Only 75% of the physicians responded to the survey. There were more than 50% of the subjects according to whom there were no cases of elderly maltreatment yet. According to the survey its prevalence was less than 25% and the respondents didn't accept this as a universal problem. The authors finally came to the conclusion that more knowledge and awareness is required amongst the physicians. A study was conducted by De Mattei et al[13] to evaluate the needs of health students to report child abuse and neglect. The study included 236 students from 5 health programs. The proforma had questions regarding perceptions about child abuse and neglect. There were only 50% of the subjects who knew that it was a crime to not to report child abuse. From the study, the authors concluded that there is insufficient knowledge regarding the awareness about child abuse. According to our study, there were 61.1% (n=55) who knew that physician should report a case of child abuse to child protection agencies. There were 54.4% (n=49) who knew that suspected cases of child abuse to the Child Protection Agencies but exemption should be given from legal procedure due to this allegation. Approximately, 58.9% physicians should report all signs and symptoms of physical abuse should done using a standardized form.

Conclusion

From the above study, it can be concluded that there is a need to enhance the knowledge and awareness about child abuse and neglect. The knowledge is not up to the desirable standards. Many physicians are still unaware about the management and identification of child abuse cases.

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