

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Child physical and sexual abuse in Dammam, Saudi Arabia: A descriptive case-series analysis study

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Abstract *Background:* Child abuse, including sexual abuse, is a problem in all societies regardless of cultural and/or religious backgrounds. Until 2007, the law referred victims of sexual crimes to gynecologists for forensic examination in Saudi Arabia. Since then, the Forensic Department has taken over responsibility for the examination of such cases; a special forensic clinic was established at that time.

Objective: To describe the socio-medical and forensic characteristics of reported cases of living child abuse in the maternity and children hospital (MCH) and the forensic and legal center (FLC) in Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

Research design and methods: This research uses a descriptive case-series analysis that targets all reported physical and sexual assaults on victims less than 18 years old in the MCH from 2008 till the end of 2010 and FLC from 2006 to 2010.

Results: Out of 87 reported cases, 85% of the assaults were sexual, 12.6% of the assaults were non-sexual and 2.3% were combined (both sexual and non-sexual abuse). Cases of sexual abuse were significantly higher in the older age group in comparison to the non-sexually assaulted group, which occurred more often at younger ages ($P < 0.001$). The mean age was (11.04 + 5.07). Most victims were females (56.3%) and Saudi (90.8%).

Conclusion: There is an increasing pattern of reports over recent years. Therefore, there is a need for more collaboration and advertising about the forensic clinic in order to improve the handling of sexual abuse cases.

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1. Introduction

Forensic medicine in Saudi Arabia has gone through great development over the past few years. The forensic medical examiner is responsible for examining living victims of assault in addition to postmortem examination.¹ Children represent one age group that present to the forensic clinic with various types of assaults, including physical and sexual abuses. Careful assessment and evaluation of these victims is highly important

for legal purposes because the presence of bodily injuries plays a significant role in any criminal investigation.²

Sexual assault occurs when any sexual act is carried out upon a person without his or her consent. Sexual assault is rarely reported for many reasons: embarrassment, guilt, lack of awareness regarding victim's rights, unwillingness to confront the legal system, the need to keep the event hidden from significant people, and fear of not being believed.^{3,4} This under-reporting makes determination of actual numbers of incidence a difficult task.

In Saudi society, the violation of personal dignity by means of sexual crimes was a hidden subject that no body wanted to discuss. Victims of such crimes, including those against children, used to be referred by law to the gynecology department for forensic examination. Since 2007, the department of forensic medicine has taken on this responsibility as dictated by the court. Thus, medicolegal reports of such cases are no longer accepted by other physicians.

This study aimed to determine the pattern of child physical and sexual abuse in Dammam in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The specific research objectives included analysis of demographic data related to the victim and assailant as well as evaluation of the injuries incurred as a result of sexual assault.

2. Methodology

This study is a retrospective in nature, descriptive case-series analysis study that targeted all reported assaulted living children in the MCH from 2008 till end of the 2010 and in the FLC from 2006 to 2010. A person under the age of 18 was defined as a child. Data were collected retrospectively by revising patients' files using a checklist predesigned by the investigator. A gynecologist was the examiner in all MCH cases, while a forensic consultant or specialist conducted examinations in the FLC. Data included demographic information, type of

assault, relationship to assailant, and results of examination. Data management and statistical analysis were done using the SPSS-10 statistical package for Windows.

3. Results

Out of 87 reported cases, 37 (42.7%) were from MCH and 50 (57.5%) from FLC (Fig. 1). Most assaults (37.9%) occurred in 2009 (Table 1). The mean age was 11.04 ± 5 years. Most victims were females (56.3%), but male victims composed 43.7% of the population. The majority of the cases were in primary school (38%). The place of assault was mainly at the victim's home (50.6%). The father was the person who reported the assault in 47% of all cases. Wherein the father victimized the child, it has been found that the mother was the informer in 16% followed by the police officer 8%, see (Fig. 1). A history of depression was reported in 3.4% of cases.

Regarding the number of assailants, there was a single assailant in 60% of all reported cases. In 31.4% of all reported cases, the identity of the assailant was a stranger followed by father ($P = 0.004$). Different types of assault were reported (Fig. 2). Approximately 85% of total cases were sexual assaults; 12.6% were non-sexual, and 2.3% were combined (both

Table 1 Number of reported cases of child abuse over the studied period in both centers.

Year	MCH	FLC	Total
2010	14	7	21(24.1)
2009	22	11	33(37.9)
2008	8	12	20(22.9)
2007	—	4	4(4.6%)
2006	—	9	6(6.9)
Total			87(100)

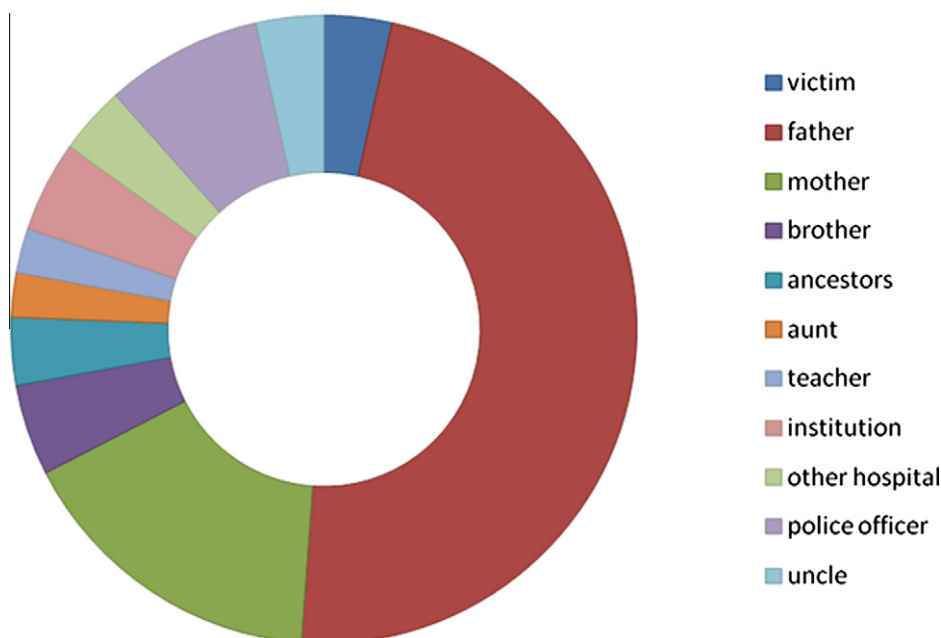


Figure 1 Reporter identity.

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