

Health Professional Role in Identifying and Assessing Victims of Human Labor Trafficking

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking (HT) is a global and national public health issue with many quantifying concerns. Health care providers may encounter victims of HT in a clinical setting yet not realize that these individuals are being trafficked. Subtle cries for help may go unnoticed if the health care provider is not aware of the signs and symptoms. This article will identify HT and its impact on the victims and society. The article will also address the health care provider's role in identifying, assessing, and providing victims with supportive resources. The intent is to prepare health care professions for this public health concern.

Keywords: domestic trafficking, domestic workers, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, slavery, violence against women, women's health care

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A practitioner in the emergency department is seeing a female client for a report of abdominal pain. The client spoke with an Eastern European accent. She appeared to be in severe pain but reticent to discuss its history. The client kept looking at the man who accompanied her. The practitioner, sensing something was wrong, asked the client to go back into an examination room so a more thorough examination could be performed. At this point, the man asked why the practitioner could not just order her a medication. The practitioner responded that a medication could not be ordered without first determining the exact problem. The man grabbed the client by her arm and left the office setting.

WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

This scene may be all too common for women victims of human trafficking (HT). The statistics are staggering and have been on the rise. HT, also known as trafficking in persons, refers to the situation in which someone obtains or holds an individual against his or her will in forced or compelled service or labor. **Box 1** offers various definitions related to the topic of HT.¹ Victims of

trafficking may be performing jobs or activities in which they were coerced or deceived into and which they cannot leave.² The accounts of HT reported include “little or no pay for menial and difficult work, debt bondage, confiscated documents such as passports, undocumented immigrant status, long and grueling work hours, as well as threats of harm, physical assault, and emotional abuse.”^{3(p4)} In other words, HT victims are modern-day slaves. HT can result in serious health issues for the victims. By learning to recognize and report victims of HT, practitioners are in a prime position to help them.

Who Are the Victims?

The faces of trafficked persons are as diverse as our population. “Trafficking is a crime that cuts across race, nationality, gender, age, and socio-economic background.”^{4(p1)} Some victims are well educated, whereas others have no formal education, and many do not speak English. In the United States, it is estimated that there are approximately 800,000 HT victims of all sexes, ages, and ethnicities. The US Department of Justice Report offers “confirmed victims of labor trafficking were more likely to be

Box 1. What Is Trafficking in Persons?¹**SEX TRAFFICKING**

Adult engagement in commercial sex such as prostitution where the individual was forced or coerced by use of psychological or physical threats. Sex trafficking may also be associated with “debt bondage” wherein individuals are forced to prostitute themselves as a means of paying back a debt incurred through their “transportation, recruitment, or “sale.”

CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING

Recruiting of individuals under 18 years of age through enticement, transport, or maintaining of these children to perform commercial sex. The use of children in the commercial sex trade is prohibited under US law and in most countries.

FORCED LABOR

Also known as labor trafficking. This term encompasses the recruitment, transport, providing, or obtaining individuals for the purpose of forcing the individual to work through deceit, force, physical, or psychological threats.

BONDED LABOR OR DEBT BONDAGE

A type of coercion that requires the victim to work to pay off his or her own or the ancestor’s debts. US law prohibits the use of a debt or threats of financial harm as a form of coercion.

FORCED CHILD LABOR

Children who are forced to work in situations that financially benefit someone outside of the child’s family and does not offer the child the option of leaving.

UNLAWFUL RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Unlawful recruitment and use of children through fraud, coercion, or force by armed forces to be used as combatants, cooks, guards, servants, messengers, or spies. Boys may also be sexually abused, and girls may be forced to marry or have sex with the soldiers.

male, older and foreign than confirmed victims of sex trafficking” who were more likely young and female.^{5(p6)} Seventy-nine percent of the victims of the US HT trade fall into the slavery category of sexually abused women; 21% of whom are underage children. Female victims are both women and girls who are taken from their environment, sometimes across borders.⁶ According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, individuals may be trafficking victims “regardless of whether they once consented or even participated in a crime as a direct result of being trafficked.”^{1(p1)}

Globally, it is estimated that there are 20.9 million individuals who are trafficked to work in areas of

sexual exploitation, forced labor, organ removal, and other forms of exploitation including child soldiers and trafficking for rituals.⁷ Trafficking victims may be exploited within the confines of legal activities such as mining, housecleaning, agriculture, manufacturing, sales crews, health and elder care, or dressmaking. However, the victims may also be exploited within illegal activities including prostitution, pickpocketing, escort services, strip clubs, massage parlors, or drug running. Victims of forced labor also include those who are made to participate in the state military or to fight with rebel armed forces.^{2,8}

“The US is one of the largest markets for trafficking the world, second only to Germany.”^{6(p462)} Because

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