

## Human Trafficking - Medical effects on victims

### *What is Human Trafficking?*

Trafficking in human beings is a gross violation of human rights, a modern day form of slavery and an extremely profitable business for organised crime. 'Trafficking in persons' is defined<sup>1</sup> as:

'the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.'

This definition has three distinct elements, which must be fulfilled for a situation to be one of trafficking - there must be an act, a means and a purpose. The consent of the victim is irrelevant when any of the means have been used. Many victims of human trafficking are forced to work in prostitution or the commercial sex industry. However human trafficking also occurs in forms of labour exploitation such as domestic servitude or restaurant work, sweatshop factory work or migrant agricultural work. In the case of a child (anyone under 18 years of age) actions taken for the purpose of exploitation constitute trafficking even where the means have not been used. There is no requirement that a person must have crossed a border for trafficking to take place - it can and does take place within national borders.

### *Identifying victims of Human Trafficking*

Victims of human trafficking may look like many of the patients coming to GP waiting rooms, health clinics or emergency rooms. Victims can be young children, teenagers, men and women. By looking beneath the surface and asking yourself questions such as the following, you can help identify potential victims:

- Is the patient accompanied by another person who seems controlling (possibly the trafficker)?
- Can you detect any physical or psychological abuse?
- Does the patient seem submissive or fearful?
- Does the patient have any identification?

Gaining the trust of a victim of human trafficking is an important step in providing assistance. **Remember** that this may be the first and only contact a victim of human

---

<sup>1</sup> Article 3(a) of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, 2000 which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (commonly known as the Palermo Protocol).

trafficking has with someone apart from the trafficker or it may be their one and only opportunity to explain their situation or ask for help<sup>2</sup>.

### ***Common Health Issues experienced by Victims of Human Trafficking***<sup>3</sup>

Trafficking victims may suffer from an array of physical and psychological health issues stemming from inhumane living conditions, poor sanitation, inadequate nutrition, poor personal hygiene, brutal physical and emotional attacks at the hands of their traffickers, dangerous workplace conditions, occupational hazards and general lack of quality health care.

Preventive health care is virtually non-existent for these individuals. Health issues are typically not treated in their early stages, but tend to fester until they become critical, even life-endangering situations.

In many cases, health care is administered at least initially by an unqualified individual hired by the trafficker with little, if any, regard for the well-being of their 'patients' - and even less regard for disease, infection or contamination control.

Health issues seen in trafficking victims include the following:

- Sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, pelvic pain, rectal trauma and urinary difficulties from working in the sex industry;
- Pregnancy, resulting from rape or prostitution;
- Infertility from chronic untreated sexually transmitted infections or botched or unsafe abortions;
- Infections or mutilations caused by unsanitary and dangerous medical procedures performed by the trafficker's so-called 'doctor';
- Chronic back, hearing, cardiovascular or respiratory problems from endless days toiling in dangerous agriculture, sweatshop or construction conditions;
- Weak eyes and other eye problems from working in dimly lit sweatshops;
- Malnourishment and serious dental problems. These are especially acute with child trafficking victims who often suffer from retarded growth and poorly formed or rotted teeth;
- Infectious diseases like tuberculosis;
- Undetected or untreated diseases, such as diabetes or cancer;
- Bruises, scars and other signs of physical abuse and torture. Sex-industry victims are often beaten in areas that won't damage their outward appearance, like their lower back;
- Substance abuse problems or addictions either from being coerced into drug use by their traffickers or by turning to substance abuse to help cope with or mentally escape their desperate situations.

---

<sup>2</sup> Material from *Caring for Trafficked Persons: A Guide for Health Providers* - IOM, UN.GIFT and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

<sup>3</sup> Details taken from *National Symposium on the Health Needs of Human Trafficking Victims - Post-Symposium Brief* - US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

### ***Principles for conducting ethical and safe interviews with victims of trafficking<sup>4</sup>***

It is important to be aware that victims of human trafficking may be conditioned to mask the truth on the basis that they have been led to believe that no-one will believe their story. Furthermore they may fear repercussions for their family if they disclose the truth. Bearing this in mind and if you suspect that a patient is a victim of human trafficking it is important to discretely separate the patient from any individual who may be accompanying him/her since this person may be the trafficker posing as a spouse, other family member or employer. Then:

- Ask questions in a sensitive and sensible manner
- Listen actively and responsively and acknowledge what is being said
- Observe signs that a victim of human trafficking needs a break
- Believe and do not judge - leave aside any preconceptions or prejudices
- Maintain professionalism while treating victim with respect and compassion
- Provide reassurance to victim that he/she is not to blame
- Ensure confidentiality
- Inform the victim that he/she has a right to a forensic medical exam and report
- Inform the victim that he/she has a right to all health and medical records.

Using the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire<sup>5</sup> to assess trafficked women's potential risk for post-traumatic stress disorder it was found that symptoms associated with the disorder include

- re-experiencing traumatic events
- psychological arousal
- avoidance and numbing.

One of the main findings of the report is that victims of trafficking require medical attention to treat urgent medical complications and also medical care that responds to their basic needs such as rest, and good nutrition that will facilitate recuperation from post traumatic stress related symptoms, fatigue and loss of appetite. A full copy of the report ***Stolen Smiles***, is available at: [www.lshtm.ac.uk/genderviolence](http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/genderviolence).

### ***What to do if you identify a person as a suspected victim of trafficking***

As a GP there are a number of things you can do if you consider that this patient before you is a victim of human trafficking as follows:

- Be sensitive to the person and make sure that you do not put either them or yourself in danger - be discreet about the information you give them.
- If you suspect a patient to be in immediate danger, notify the Garda Síochána by dialling 999 or 112.
- Endeavour to record as much information about the situation as possible.
- GPs can refer patients and/or provide patients with contact details of the **Women's Health Project** under the auspices of the HSE for access to State services. Contact details for the HSE Women's Health Project are **Telephone**

---

<sup>4</sup> Material taken from *Stolen Smiles: A Summary Report on the physical and psychological health consequences of women and adolescents trafficked in Europe*.

<sup>5</sup> Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) Manual: Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese Versions. 1991, Boston: Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma.

**01-6699515** or **Freephone 1-800-201187**. The HSE Women's Health Project acts as a central referral agency for all victims, male and female, of human trafficking and offers comprehensive care planning and sexual health screening. The HSE Women's Health Project caters for all the needs of the victim of human trafficking hence GPs are not required to make any further referrals.

- GPs can refer patients to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) anti-trafficking services e.g. Ruhama for sexual exploitation, MRCI for labour exploitation, ICI for information, legal advice and counselling
- The website - **[www.blueblindfold.gov.ie](http://www.blueblindfold.gov.ie)** contains detailed information on the Trafficking of Human Beings including details on services available to victims of trafficking and contact details for NGOs.