Human Trafficking: How Hospitals Can Identify Victims

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It’s not often that a blog broaches the difficult topic of human trafficking. But in my view, the subject is too important not to address since the first step to any change is awareness. The facts are that approximately two million adults and children in the United States are victims of human trafficking. And hospital staff are among the most likely people to encounter this hidden population. Knowing what to ask and what to look for at the point of care can save lives.

We’ve learned from survivors that approximately 87 percent of them were seen by health care providers while they were under the control of their traffickers, and 63 percent had been to the emergency department. These statistics show that, with training and supporting intervention programs, hospitals and their staff have a unique opportunity to identify victims and give them not only the care they need, but also the resources to break away from their captors.

In Sacramento, California, known as a high-trafficking area, a pilot study at UC Davis Medical Center brought to light how challenging it can be to identify victims. Over a seven-month period in 2017, a 14-question screening survey was administered to 143 medically stable, female patients ages 18-40 who presented to the ED. Survey results identified 46 potential trafficking victims, with 10 cases ultimately confirmed. Of those 10 patients, none were identified solely on the basis of physicians’ concerns. The ‘a-ha’ moment? Questioning is crucial to identification. Through this and other studies and programs, awareness continues to increase, especially in January, which is the federally designated Human Trafficking Awareness Month.

Several Vizient member hospitals provide employee training on this topic, and some have offered it for more than a decade. However, programs are still needed in all types of facilities – academic medical centers, community hospitals and even children’s hospitals -- to make a meaningful impact on the problem of human trafficking.

Developing a programmed response to clinician suspicion of trafficking

Emergency departments are at the heart of a hospital's response to trafficking, but the most successful programs take an ‘all-hands-on-deck’ approach in their planning and implementation. Each role is important in the coordinated effort.

Emergency department leaders should determine program procedures and provide training for department staff that includes documentation of trafficking red flags and ways to intervene while protecting crucial evidence. This includes the implementation of protocols for working with law enforcement, establishing key contacts and outlining steps to avoid compromising critical information. Additionally, social workers and case managers should develop necessary resources and referrals for outpatient follow-up and counseling.

Of equal importance is the organizational and financial support from the hospital's executive leadership team. The multifaceted coordination demonstrates a hospital's commitment to assisting those caught up in the bonds of trafficking.

Other program components may include:

- Assistance for health education programs that help the public recognize signs of human trafficking in the community and how to safely report it
- Distribution of age-appropriate information to high school students
- Inclusion of community and faith-based organizations that offer temporary housing, financial assistance and childcare services
- Development of a reliable methodology for collecting data on victims for potential depositions and for grant proposals and funding requests for federal assistance

For more information about human trafficking and ways you can make a difference, visit the human trafficking hotline here. You may also contact Sherri Mason for assistance in identifying available resources or training. To report suspected human trafficking, call 866-347-2423.
About the author. Sherri Mason's 25 years of experience in the health care industry include time spent in critical care, cardiac cath lab, interventional radiology and emergency department practice; clinical trial and IRB membership management; and medical-legal and hospital consulting. She has been published as a contributing textbook author for health information management, medical assisting and legal aspects of nursing; and guided implementation and development of new clinical programs involving research and cardiovascular services. Mason is a member of American Association of Nurse Practitioners and holds certification as a family nurse practitioner.

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