Take Action to Reduce Risk of Similar Harm

Improving Identification of Patients at Risk for Human Trafficking

Individuals experiencing labor and sex trafficking/exploitation have been identified in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Today, human trafficking is a more urgent issue with the increased use of online communication by children, especially unsupervised use associated with the pandemic. Trafficked and exploited children frequently seek care at medical facilities, including emergency departments, urgent care centers, primary care clinics and specialty clinics. These interactions with health professionals provide a critical opportunity to offer services to vulnerable patients. However, research indicates that many trafficked persons do not spontaneously disclose their exploitation to medical staff. In addition, lack of training and facility guidelines/protocols on human trafficking result in many missed opportunities for victim identification and services.

Resultant harm
Individuals exploited for sex and/or labor may experience serious physical and mental health adversities, including injury, toxic exposures, malnutrition, dehydration, physical and sexual assault, and sexually transmitted and other communicable infections. Post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression and suicidality, substance and alcohol abuse/addiction and anxiety disorders are common.

Fundamental issue
While persons experiencing human trafficking may seek health care, they face innumerable barriers to disclosing their exploitation and seeking assistance from staff. Such barriers may originate with the trafficked individual who feels shame, fear, hopelessness, or who lacks awareness of their exploitative situation. Further barriers may arise from a trafficker, who intimidates or threatens the patient to remain silent. Notably, important barriers to human trafficking identification lie within the locus of control of the health professional and the health care organization. Providers may not recognize signs of exploitation due to lack of knowledge of human trafficking or may feel discomfort in broaching the topic with patients. They may misperceive the situation and overlook key indicators of exploitation due to biases about victimization. They may feel unable to address the issue due to lack of screening tools, lack of time, and lack of organizational protocols. Health professionals may be unaware of available community and national resources for trafficked persons. They may feel the health care organization’s priorities are focused on other critical health issues.

The health care professional has an important role to play in recognizing and serving adults and children who experience human trafficking victimization. Many barriers to assistance may be addressed through identification of local victim service organizations and resources, policy and protocol development, and staff training and education. Multiple resources are available to providers and health care organizations seeking to address the issue of human trafficking.

Actions to mitigate risk of similar harm at your hospital
1. Identify community and national resources for trafficked persons through a community mapping exercise
   The National Human Trafficking Hotline provides assistance in identifying local resources (1-888-373-7888) or SMS: 233733 (Text “HELP” or “INFO”).

2. Create a facility policy and protocol for recognizing and responding to suspected labor and sex trafficking

Leverage your PSO membership.
Learn from each other to reduce patient harm and Serious Safety Events.
3. Train ALL staff on human trafficking, available community resources, the trauma-informed approach to care, mandatory reporting laws, and on the facility protocol
   - SOAR to Health and Wellness
   - Institute on Healthcare and Human Trafficking at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta
   - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach
   - American Academy of Pediatrics clinical practice guidelines

4. Monitor and evaluate protocol implementation and effectiveness, and patient satisfaction

Resources

Additional Resources
- BeAlert® Strategy. The Stop Trafficking Project. (n.d.).

Contributors
Jordan Greenbaum, M.D., Medical Director, International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children
Staff Physician
Stephanie V. Blank Center for Safe and Healthy Children
Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta

Acknowledgements
We thank the Helfer Society Child Trafficking Committee for their review of this Alert.

Contact Us
Emily Tooley, MSN, RN, CPPS, CPHQ
Analyst, Patient Safety
913-981-4130

This alert is approved for general distribution to improve pediatric safety and reduce patient harm. This Alert meets the standards of non-identification in accordance with 3.212 of the Patient Safety Quality Improvement Act (PSQIA) and is a permissible disclosure by Child Health PSO.

In accordance with our Terms of Use and Code of Conduct, this material cannot be used for any commercial transactions that are unrelated to the original intent of Child Health PSO Patient Safety Action Alerts.