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Clinic Detects Domestic Violence

A child-safety questionnaire used at a University of Arizona pediatrics center identified 138 cases over two years.

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Over two years, a child-safety questionnaire used in a UA clinic identified 138 cases of domestic violence, the study's authors estimated.

More than two-thirds of those would not have been revealed without the screening, the authors said.

"Our results showed that asking the simple questions identified women in a very dramatic way and really permitted us to intervene on their behalf in a way that we couldn't if we didn't ask," said Dr. Richard Wahl, a pediatrician with the UA Steele Memorial Children's Research Center.

Once the clinic began to ask about domestic violence, staffers received requests for assistance and referrals on a daily basis, Wahl and co-authors social worker Doris Sisk and Dr. Thomas Ball wrote in an article published June 30 by the online journal BMC Medicine.

Domestic violence is not just an issue for doctors who care for adults, Wahl said, because child abuse often is present in families with domestic violence problems.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has identified domestic violence as a pediatric concern and says child abuse occurs in one-third to three-quarters of families where there is domestic violence.

Sisk said the UA study shows domestic violence screening could be incorporated into even the busiest practices. The UA clinic records 16,000 patient visits a year.

"We'd like to challenge all pediatricians to find a way to screen for domestic violence," she said.

Several years ago, Wahl and Sisk designed a safety questionnaire that included questions about domestic violence. Parents who bring children to the clinic are asked whether they

are now or have ever been in a relationship with someone who has hit, kicked, slapped, punched or threatened to hurt them.

The clinic collected 7,070 questionnaires from May 2001 through April 2003 and found that 15 percent of the parents, mostly mothers, experienced or were experiencing domestic violence.

Two percent, or 138, had current issues with domestic violence. The authors said more than 40 cases per year of domestic violence probably would have been missed without the screening.

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