

Townsend Letter for Doctors and Patients

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Domestic violence prevention programs in health care settings are cost effective.

Programs that address domestic violence in health care settings can save victims' lives, improve health outcomes and prevent incidents of domestic violence from escalating. They also can save health care organizations money. These are among the conclusions of *The Business Case for Domestic Violence Programs in Health Care Settings*, a new publication from the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPF) and Physicians for a Violence-Free Society.

As health care costs escalate, most health care decision-makers are looking for ways to reduce expenses and some may question the value of new programs and services. Health care leaders and advocates who are working to improve the response to domestic violence must make persuasive arguments that programs that address abuse offer financial, clinical and social benefits. *The Business Case for Domestic Violence Programs* is designed to help advocates do just that.

The Business Case for Domestic Violence Programs provides a rationale for health programs to address domestic violence, and outlines the costs and benefits of these programs. It addresses the dollars an institution will save as a result of domestic violence prevention programs, the legal liability of not responding to abuse and the health benefits of prevention for patients, their families and communities.

“Health care providers are in a unique position to help victims of abuse who seek routine or emergency medical care. But too often health care organizations do not have programs in place to identify family violence and aid victims,” said FVPF President Esta Soler. “In today’s

economic climate, hospitals and other health care organizations are hesitant to implement new programs. This unique resource outlines the reasons that family violence programs are good financial investments as well as lifesaving clinical practice.”

Nearly one-third of American women (31%) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives, according to a Commonwealth Fund survey. In 2000, 1,247 women – on average, more than three women per day – were murdered by their intimate partners, according to the US Department of Justice. In addition to injuries, family violence is connected to a number of adverse physical health effects including arthritis, chronic pain, sexually transmitted infections, gastrointestinal problems, poor health behaviors such as smoking and a host of mental health consequences.

Domestic violence has a significant financial impact on health systems’ cost of delivering care. A 1994 study at a large health plan in Minneapolis and St. Paul found that \$1,775 more was spent per year on abused women who utilized hospital services than on a random sample of general enrollees. Published in the *Journal of Family Practice* in 1999, the study concluded that early identification and treatment of victims and potential victims will most likely benefit health care systems in the long run. Another study found that victims have 1.5-2.3 times higher utilizations and costs than comparison groups (equivalent to \$1,722-\$2,790 annually). And emerging research is expected to show at least a 20% decrease in health care costs as a result of hospital based domestic violence interventions.

But few health care providers are screening patients for abuse. A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in August of 1999 found that less than 10% of primary care physicians routinely screen their patients for partner abuse during regular office visits.

“Domestic violence screening programs have a significant positive impact on the quality and cost of medical outcomes. They can save lives and save money for hospitals and health care facilities,” said FVPF Managing Director Debbie Lee, who oversees the FVPF’s health program and is Director of the FVPF’s National Health Initiative on Domestic Violence. “Providers need to buy into screening as a high standard of care, meeting medical and ethical standards of care. But they also need to know that failure to identify family violence is a legal liability that can

result in higher health care costs for patients who return with recurring problems whose underlying cause is hidden.”

The Business Case for Domestic Violence Programs gives domestic violence identification program supporters the tools to make the case for these programs when meeting with chief executive or financial officers at health care institutions. It includes information on the health impact of domestic violence, the related health care costs of abuse and the ways domestic violence intervention programs can cut these costs. A central feature of The Business Case for Domestic Violence Programs is a Return on Investment (ROI) tool that helps users input information about their own health care setting and analyze the costs and potential benefits of a domestic violence program. It provides a model to track and assess clinical improvement goals based on improved patient health and safety. The publication also provides national research findings to support key changes in infrastructure to care for victims of violence.

Guided by a National Advisory Committee of experts from managed care, health quality and research and domestic violence fields, the ROI tool was field tested by health care organizations in Iowa, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. The Business Case for Domestic Violence Programs was made possible by funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation with support from the US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Community Services, Administration for Children and Families. It is available free of charge at www.endabuse.org/programs/healthcare or www.pvs.org, by calling 1-888-Rx-Abuse or 1-888-595-4889 (TTY), or health@endabuse.org.

The National Health Resource Center on Domestic Violence develops educational resources, training materials and model protocols on domestic violence and screening to help health care providers better serve battered women. For more than two decades, the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF) has worked to end violence against women and children around the world, because everyone has the right to a life free of violence.

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