

# **SOUTHWESTERN NEWS**

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## **DENTISTS ENCOURAGED TO BE ALERT FOR SIGNS OF CHILD ABUSE**

DALLAS — September 18, 1996 — The small boy sitting in the big dentist's chair has a chipped tooth, and his mother explains that her 3-year-old son fell off his bike.

But isn't 3 a little young to be riding a bicycle? And what about the barely noticeable bruises on his arm?

These are the type of questions that Dr. Patricia Simon, assistant professor of oral and maxillofacial surgery at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, wants dental professionals to ask more often. These inquiries, she believes, might end up rescuing an abused child.

Simon, who works with the national group Prevention of Abuse and Neglect Through Dental Awareness, is a regional leader in the effort to increase awareness among dentists, dental assistants and hygienists of signs of child abuse or neglect. For the past three years she has been making presentations before professional societies in the area and offering advice on what to look for and what to do when abuse is suspected.

"When you know what you're looking for, it's amazing how much you can see," she said.

While awareness of child abuse has increased substantially among physicians in recent years, many dentists still have little or no training in how to spot the warning signs, Simon said.

"As dentists, we are right up next to the patient, and we know how things should look. We know how particular injuries occur," she said. "We should be ready to take action if we see something suspicious, and we should know how to ask the parents very pointed questions to determine if abuse has occurred."

Dental professionals should pay special attention when an injury does not quite match up to the story, such as when a parent claims that a child's injury occurred during an activity

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uncommon for the child's age group. For example, torn upper lips are routine among children who are just learning to walk, but they usually are not seen in children who are not yet mobile. They could indicate that a child was struck hard in the face by an adult or was hurt when the parent tried to force-feed him. Also, dental professionals should be concerned if the stories told by the child and the parent are inconsistent.

Simon said certain sexually transmitted diseases will show up in the mouth, too. "Sores or warts in the oral cavity could be the result of some kind of sexual abuse of that child," she said. Neglect often is easy to spot but harder to categorize. Rampant, unattended tooth decay is a sure sign of neglect, she said. Some children's teeth rot because their parents simply do not realize that severe damage occurs when bottles are left in babies' mouths overnight. It becomes abuse when parents do not attempt to get treatment.

Dentists, hygienists or assistants who believe they have seen a case of abuse need to inform the local child protective services unit of their suspicions, Simon said. Studies indicate 3 million children a year are abused in this country, and it occurs among every segment of society.

"Everyone should be aware of signs of abuse and do his or her part to protect children," Simon said. "Dental professionals are in a good position to help a lot of kids."

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