

# SILENCE IS DEADLY:

## *The Dentist's Role in Domestic Violence Prevention*



Practice Enhancement and Knowledge

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**D**omestic violence has been referred to as the “silent epidemic” because it occurs in private and is so widespread. It affects persons from all ages, races, religions, occupations and education levels. Abusive partners attempt to dominate and control the relationship, and may employ physical, sexual and/or psychological assaults to do so. Victims are often reluctant to report these incidents for such reasons as denial, shame, humiliation, economic dependence and especially fear.

The true incidence of domestic violence is difficult to measure due to underreporting, but surveys of its victims paint an ugly picture for all to see. According to the 2004 General Social Survey by Statistics Canada, approximately 7% of women and 6% of men experienced some type of violence – ranging from threats to sexual assaults – in their intimate relationships during the previous five years. However, the survey also found that the violence experienced by women tended to be more severe, and more often repeated, than the violence directed at men.

Compared with men, women are:

- 6 times more likely to report being sexually assaulted;
- 5 times more likely to report being choked;
- 5 times more likely to require medical attention as a result of an assault.

Approximately 75% of physical abuse cases result in injuries to the head, neck and/or mouth – areas that are all clearly visible during a dental examination. Yet, studies indicate that most dentists do not intervene when abuse is suspected. Reasons cited by dentists include



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ANTWANETTE NEWTON



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PEAK

## Silence is Deadly: The Dentist's Role in Domestic Violence Prevention

➤ lack of training, lack of resources, language and cultural barriers, and fears of being wrong.

With the current issue of Dispatch, PEAK offers members the following article on this important topic: "Silence is Deadly: The Dentist's Role in Domestic Violence Prevention", from the June 2008 issue of AGD Impact.

The article exposes the culture of silence that isolates victims of domestic violence and discourages them from seeking help. The article goes on to emphasize the important role that dentists may play in recognizing and referring patient victims by using the AVDR approach.

Ontario laws require dentists to report cases of suspected child abuse to the authorities. However, there is no such mandatory reporting requirement in cases involving adult victims. Nevertheless, dentists may provide a vital

service by recognizing and referring patient victims. The objective of the AVDR approach is to help patient victims without imposing the unreasonable expectation that dentists will solve the problem of domestic violence.

For further information and resource materials about domestic violence, including a directory of transition houses and shelters for abused women in Canada, please visit the website for The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence at [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/).

### key points to consider

The best way to identify a patient victim of domestic violence is to ask.

In the vast majority of cases, an intervention only requires 5 to 10 minutes of the dentist's time.

#### USE THE AVDR APPROACH

1. **ASK** about abuse.
2. **VALIDATE** that battering is wrong, while confirming the victim's worth.
3. **DOCUMENT** the presenting signs of abuse.
4. **REFER** the victim to domestic violence specialists.

No matter what the patient victim decides to do – or not do – about the abuse, continue to be supportive.