

Studies find epidemic of domestic violence

Full story: <http://archives.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/cgi-bin/texis.cgi/web/vortex/display?slug=domesticviolence16m&date=20060516>

By Warren King

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Domestic violence against women is at epidemic proportions, and physicians need to pay closer attention to it, say new local studies on the issue.

Nearly half of the women surveyed in the Puget Sound area reported that they had been physically, sexually or psychologically abused by their partners at some point in their adult lives. That includes 30 percent who had been hit and 11 percent who said they had been raped by their partners.

"It's an enormous problem that's buried in our society. ... It's across the population and it has major effects," said Dr. Robert S. Thompson, the lead author of one of two studies done by scientists at the Group Health Center for Health Studies, Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center and the University of Washington.

Among a random sample of 3,429 adult female members of Group Health, 44 percent reported they had been physically abused or subjected to emotional abuse, such as threats and chronic disparaging remarks, from domestic partners. Those partners varied from current and former spouses, to dating relationships and lovers.

The rate of abuse was higher for women who were younger, single and had lower incomes. And if they had been physically or sexually abused as children, or had witnessed such abuse, they were about twice as likely to be abused, the researchers reported.

"If you're a little kid and this is normal in your day-to-day life, when you get to be an adult, it's still normal," said Thompson, who is a senior investigator at the Group Health Center for Health Studies.

But the women surveyed came from a wide range of incomes and education levels.

"This is an equal opportunity problem," Thompson said. "It's not just single, low-income people."

For as many as 13 percent of the women, the domestic abuse lasted for more than 20 years. About 15 percent said they had been abused within the last five years, with 8 percent reporting that they had been abused within the past last year. The study was conducted from 2003 to 2004.

The second study evaluated the effects of the abuse, and they were often devastating. Compared with women who had not suffered abuse, those who had been abused recently were four times more likely to be severely depressed, and three times more likely to be in poor or only fair health, said the lead author, Dr. Amy Bonomi of Group Health, and her colleagues.