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The Role of the paediatrician in child abuse: Challenges, controversies and cultural contexts

As advocates for the wellbeing of children, pediatricians play a vitally important and broad-ranging role in recognising, assessing, managing and preventing child abuse (whether physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect). Fulfilling this role requires multidisciplinary collaboration with child protective services, medical social workers, nurses, psychologists and other professionals. The pediatrician who works with victims of child abuse needs skills in forensic interviewing, forensic examination, medical report writing, and providing testimony in court. Beyond treating physical injuries, the pediatrician also needs to consider victims' wellbeing holistically and long-term, addressing mental wellness and future health risks from adverse childhood experiences. The pediatrician may also be called to play a leadership role in multidisciplinary teams; be a passionate educator about child abuse to fellow doctors, other professionals and the public; and help to shape national (and international) policies and attitudes concerning the safeguarding of children.

The pediatrician needs to have well-informed opinions about controversies ranging from the significance of medical findings (for example, retinal hemorrhages in abusive head injury) to child safeguarding policies (where ensuring safety and preserving families could be competing priorities). Our beliefs and advocacy concerning the discipline of children need to be evidence-based.

It is also essential to understand cultural contexts. Practices regarded as abusive in one culture may be considered

acceptable in another. Regardless, if evidence of harm is demonstrated, societal attitudes must shift. Some jurisdictions have adopted an initial "harm minimisation" approach toward possibly harmful practices that are deeply ingrained in the culture of specific communities. Studies have shown that public and professional attitudes do change with time.

The speaker addresses these issues with insights from current literature, the experience of KK Women's and Children's Hospital (Singapore's largest pediatric hospital, which manages over 400 cases of alleged child abuse a year), and a decade of personal experience in child abuse pediatrics and pediatric emergency medicine.

Speaker Biography

Wong Choong Yi Peter, is a Senior Consultant in the Children's Emergency and Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect Team of KK Women's and Children's Hospital. He has co-authored several textbook chapters and peer-reviewed journal articles on child abuse pediatrics. His work in child safeguarding and in pediatric emergency medicine has been recognized through several national awards for service excellence and contribution to public service. A passionate teacher, he is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Paediatrics in the National University of Singapore (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine; Adjunct Assistant Professor, Duke-NUS Medical School; Adjunct Assistant Professor, Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine; and faculty member of 3 Residency Programs (Paediatrics, Emergency Medicine, Family Medicine). He has been an invited speaker at several international conferences, including the International Conference on Emergency Medicine (ICEM) where he has also served as a track chair.

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