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Physical signs of child abuse.

by Phillip L. Walker

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A colour atlas.--Christopher J Hobbs, Jane M Wynne.
London: W B Saunders. 1996. Pp 245. \$77. ISBN
0-7020-1778-7.

This is a very important book that has the potential to help many abused children. It is often said that a photograph can say as much as a thousand words. For the Physical Signs of Child Abuse, this adage is certainly true. It is a superbly produced reference book that contains more than 800 excruciatingly detailed colour photographs of children with injuries inflicted through physical abuse, neglect, and sexual assault.

To stop child abuse, health professionals must be able to detect its physical signs. Realising this, Hobbs and Wynne have systematically documented the physical evidence of child abuse they have seen during many years of clinical experience. The cases they illustrate provide a detailed overview of the injuries commonly seen in abused children. The photographs are accompanied by captions containing thumbnail sketches of case histories and descriptions of the injuries. Photographs are also provided of normal findings and conditions that can be confused with abuse.

These photographs and case descriptions have been assembled with a broad audience in mind. Anyone who needs to be able to recognise the visible clinical findings seen in abused children should have access to a copy of this book. It is of direct relevance to all professionals who see children including doctors, dentists, social workers, nurses, teachers, police officers, and coroners. Emergency room workers and paediatricians certainly will benefit from having a copy. Lawyers and other legal professionals who need to evaluate evidence presented in judicial proceedings will also find it a useful reference.

The book is divided into four sections: methods of examination and photography, physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. The methods section gives concise descriptions of procedures for examining and describing the injuries of children who may have been abused. It contains information on the appearance and healing rates of bruises and fractures and includes a three-page table that describes in detail the appearance and causes of anogenital lesions resulting from sexual abuse.

The physical abuse section provides illustrations of bruises

and soft-tissue injuries, burns and scalds, and head and eye injuries. It also contains radiographs of fractures, necropsy photographs of children who experienced fatal abuse, and illustrations of conditions that should be considered in the differential diagnosis of physical abuse.

The effects of parental neglect are shown with cases of children who failed to receive adequate food and medical care. Many of these children also suffered from other forms of abuse. Growth charts are used to document the stunting such children experience. These charts provide some remarkable examples of the catch-up growth that can occur when neglected children are placed in a nurturing environment.

The section on physical evidence of sexual abuse will principally be of interest to doctors who examine children and legal professionals involved in cases in which there are allegations of sexual abuse. It includes photographs of common anogenital findings in sexually abused children. There are also illustrations of normal age-related changes, and variants that an inexperienced physician might confuse with evidence of sexual abuse. These examples of normal children are augmented by a series of cases illustrating problems of differential diagnosis and examples of lesions associated with sexually transmitted diseases.

The reality of the abuse this book documents is worse than most can bear to imagine. Even for people such as myself who are used to horrific sights, the cumulative effect of viewing so much photographic evidence of the suffering of helpless children is an intensely emotional and distressing experience. This is an experience that many people would like to avoid and to this extent Physical Signs of Child Abuse suffers from its own eloquence. Although this is not a book that you will enjoy looking at, it contains information people concerned about the welfare of children need to have.

One of the goals of the authors is to expose a wider audience to the magnitude of the suffering of abused children and thereby motivate people to increase efforts to work on their behalf. In this way, perhaps we can revitalise some of the social constraints that prevented the chronic physical abuse of children in earlier societies. I say this based on my own research on skeletal evidence of the battered child syndrome in earlier populations. An examination of thousands of skeletons of children in archaeological collections suggests that chronic physical abuse of the kind documented in this book was extremely rare before recent times. The sociological variables responsible for this increase in cases of severe physical abuse are undoubtedly complex. It seems likely, however,

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that it is in part a result of the collapse of social control and support mechanisms that parents experienced in the past. I hope that by heightening awareness of the severity of the problem of child abuse, this book will encourage more of us to assume the protective role that concerned relatives and community members played in smaller, simpler, and more highly integrated societies.