

“Substantial” number of NHS hospital staff treat victims of human trafficking

Maternity services most likely to do so; but staff across NHS don't know how best to respond

A “substantial” proportion of NHS hospital staff—around one in eight, in some places—treat the victims of people trafficking, with maternity services most likely to do so, finds research published in the online journal **BMJ Open**.

Although understanding of the sorts of health problems trafficked patients are likely to have, is generally high, few NHS staff feel adequately prepared to respond appropriately, the findings suggest.

International law requires that the UK provides victims of human trafficking with whatever medical treatment they require, which includes psychological help, counselling, and further information on support services.

It is thought that around 2.5 million people are trafficked every year, with every country in the world either a source, transit point, or destination.

The researchers wanted to know just how likely it is that NHS hospital staff will encounter patients who have been trafficked, and how well prepared they feel to respond to them.

They therefore quizzed almost 800 NHS staff from a wide range of specialties to gauge their experience and knowledge of people trafficking, as well as their confidence in responding appropriately to it, using a validated questionnaire (PROTECT) between August 2013 and April 2014.

All the healthcare professionals were attending either mandatory training in child protection and vulnerable adult issues at 10 secondary care trusts across England, where at least five victims of human trafficking had been reported to the police the previous year, or were at meetings of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine.

In all, around one in eight (13%) staff said they had treated a patient whom they either knew, or suspected, had been trafficked. In eight trusts, this proportion rose to more than one in 10 of the staff.

Maternity services staff were the most likely to encounter victims of human trafficking, with one in five (20.4%) saying they had treated such patients.

But most staff in every specialty represented said they didn't know what questions to ask to spot potential victims (just under 89%), while more than three quarters (78%) said they didn't feel sufficiently trained to enable them to help victims adequately.

Over half said they lacked the confidence to make appropriate referrals, with referrals for men vexing the most staff (71%).

Most participants (over 95%) had no idea of the scale of human trafficking in the UK, and three out of four (76.5%) didn't realise that without appropriate safeguards, a call to the police could put patients in even more danger.

“In particular [staff] lack knowledge about how to ask about experiences of human trafficking, how and when to contact law enforcement agencies, and how to make referrals to local and national support agencies,” write the researchers.

Three out of four of those surveyed said they would be interested in targeted training around people trafficking, particularly those working in mental health and emergency medicine services.

The researchers caution that their findings may not be applicable to the entire NHS, but suggest that additional training for NHS staff could improve the wellbeing and safety of such a vulnerable group of people.