

Assault Characteristics in cases of Sexual Revictimization

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Background

There is increasing evidence indicating that people who have previously experienced sexual assault have a higher risk of experiencing new episodes of sexual assault later in life. Sexual revictimization is a controversial topic and the need for more awareness and understanding about this vulnerability factor is obvious.

Aims

To assess the prevalence of sexual revictimization among patients in a Sexual Assault Center sample (SAC) and to explore whether this phenomenon was associated with certain victim and assault characteristics.

Methods

We conducted a retrospective descriptive study of women ≥ 12 years of age attending the SAC at St. Olavs Hospital, Trondheim, Norway, between July 1, 2003 and December 31, 2010. 573 patients were included and information was extracted from medical records. We divided the patients in four groups; those who had experienced sexual assault before the age of 16, after the age of 16, and both before and after the age of 16, and those who did not report prior sexual assault at all. We compared victim and assault characteristics between the four groups of patients. Chi-square and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used in the comparisons. Statistical significance level was set as < 0.05 .

Results

In total, 35 % of the patients reported one or more prior episode of sexual assault; 17 % before age 16, 13 % after age 16 and 5 % both before and after age 16. Victim characteristics: Those reporting prior assault (regardless of before or after the age of 16 years) more often were unemployed, while those reporting prior assault before the age of 16 were younger and had a higher proportion of students. Assault characteristics: Those reporting prior assault (regardless of before or after the age of 16 years) less often reported intake of alcohol before the assault, but more often reported known assailant, and penile penetration in more than one orifice. However, those reporting prior assault before the age of 16 more often reported non-penetrative assault. Former sexual assault after age 16 was associated with partner assault and with bodily injury.

Discussion

More than a third of the victims attending the Trondheim SAC in the study period stated that they had been previously sexually assaulted, and among these 53 % reported to have been victimized before the age of 16 years. It has been known for some time that one or more

previous episodes of sexual assault increase the risk for new episodes. The knowledge about sexual revictimization is mostly based on population studies, whereas literature on this topic from SACs is sparse.

Conclusions: Detection of assault patterns related to sexual revictimization provides information which should be implemented in political prevention programs and health care guidelines.

Keywords Sexual assault, assault characteristics, sexual revictimization, sexual assault center