REVIEW ARTICLE

CHILD ABUSE IN MALAYSIA: A NEGLECTED CHILD HEALTH ISSUE

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Abstract

Child abuse's trend has been on the rise in Malaysia. Despite strong legislative rules of Child Act 2001, the response of the community is believed to be inadequate. Various factors have been highlighted to ensure effective management of the issue. Child abuse is considered a social emergency due to its complexity and involvement of emotional, family dynamic and domestic instability. The success of the managing these cases largely depends on our urgency and collaborative partnership between multidisciplinary team members, to improve on the welfare of these children, albeit a slower outcome. The community as a whole has to be proactive in reporting hidden cases to avoid mortality or morbidity, as a result of the perpetrator's actions.

Keywords: Child abuse, Maltreatment, Child protection

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Introduction

Child abuse has been documented in different strata of the society. It has become a national epidemic that requires urgent attention. Cases of abuse includes abandonment, extortion and ‘baby dumping’ nowadays have become a worrying trend as it reflects the ill state of our community. The national statistic has reported an exponential increment of child abuse cases, and this is far from reaching a plateau state. Data collected by the Department of Social Welfare, Royal Malaysian Police and health authorities have shown steady rise of total reported cases from 2001 till 2015. The statistics are often misleading and cases reported are merely the tip of the iceberg. Many cases continue to be hidden from the public leading to unbearable suffering of children behind closed doors. The questions are - Is current effort enough to restrict and reform abuse against children? What preventive measures have been taken to curb the rise of child abuse in Malaysia?

On the other hand, the increase in child abuse reporting reflects an improved awareness on the community’s responsibility to prevent these abuse cases [1]. There seems to be a changing pattern in child abuse, including worsening cases complexity and changes in nature of the type of child abuse. This includes incest and gang raped which predominantly noticed at an alarming rate in certain part of the country. The definition of child
abuse has been debated frequently. It is a state of emotional, physical, neglect and sexual maltreatment or economic or other exploitation meted out to a person aged less than 18 years of age, resulting in potential or actual harm to child’s health, survival and dignity [2].

Addressing the problem and managing the cases are not the ultimate answer to reducing the incidence and burden of child abuse. The reality, if it is reported, is often months or years after the tragedy has occurred. The silence goes on for a long time especially when the abuser is a family member. Relatives and neighbours, even when there is a suspicion, are afraid to either intervene or interfere with ‘family affairs’. Victims are sworn to secrecy, bribed, threatened and often terrified to disclose the abuse. If the cases are told to trusted guardians, children’s complaints may have been dealt unimportantly and lightly. Most cases of child abuse are young, sexually naïve and may be handicapped children who are vulnerable to exploitation by the adult predators.

Child protection has become an important issue for decades. The purpose of child protection is to ensure safe and supportive environment for children and protect them from harm, exploitation and violence [3]. In Malaysia, there are various ministries involved, namely the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Home Affairs and The Prime Minister Office. These governmental organizations have provided activities and help such as child line service, children home, child activity centres, child protection team and parenting skill workshops. One Stop Crisis Centre (OSCC) is a specialized centre for victims of violation, abuse and rape where they receive help from multidisciplinary team and inter-agency network [4]. The member of these task force include the police, the Attorney General, National Security Council and healthcare professionals. The Malaysian National Policy for children have covered many areas related to advocacy, prevention, intervention, support, rehabilitation program and establishing networking with the non-governmental organizations for the ongoing services. All these setup have brought into a participatory approach to ensure the safety of abused children. Inter-agency partnership needs to be enhanced for improve provision and legislation [5].

**Challenges**

Among the main challenges to successful OSCC was the underutilized partnership and collaboration between agencies. Delay in solving these cases is still a problem despite a clearly defined work of each agency involved. This is primarily due to lack of trained personnel, lack of enthusiasm, overwhelming caseloads, miscommunication between the agencies and misunderstanding of the roles and responsibility for each team [5]. The availability of Suspected Case of Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) team for children should reduce these bureaucratic obstacles. The scope of work involves a multiagency effort through collaborative work between police, judges, social workers, child protectors and even doctors. But there are still gaps of care, whereby these abused cases are not considered high in the priority list. This often has been neglected and assumed as non-urgent matters. Delay of care is seen in emergency department or even following hospital admission which has led to the delay in investigation and legal aid for these unfortunate children.

Many of these cases have attributed social consequences and domestic violence [6]. Violence in children usually is associated with the violence to the other family members. Investigation must be done to protect the welfare of the abused family
members as well. They are predisposed to repeated episodes of abuse and, hence long term physical and emotional morbidity. Children have the legal right to be love, education and protection from element that would lead to deprivation of emotional, psychological and physical effects. The actions taken should be focus on the best interest of affected children rather than focusing on the perpetrator. Safety of the children is the priority to avoid fatal consequences of repeated abuse. Other agencies, like police, play an important role in documenting evidence and ensuring the chain of evidence is not tampered and being doubted.

Child maltreatment reporting is mandatory in Malaysia under the Child Act 2001 [7]. It requires doctors, child minders and family members to report cases of child abuse but currently this is yet to be imposed on personnel such as teachers who are directly involved in the care of children [8]. This is important with 19% of our population still attend primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. Specific training programme to engage and raise awareness among teachers related to child maltreatment is still in infancy. Society as a whole has to take responsibility to care and to ensure our children are protected and their rights are not violated. This comes by strengthening the Malaysian Child Act 2001 through public awareness and application of the law.

Communication between the agencies has to be enhanced [5]. This includes discussion on the cases, availability of standard operational procedure, the passion to accelerate appropriate investigations and continuation of care for those abused children. Substandard care has been seen due to inadequate understanding and urge to resolve the problem. Complex cases involving abortion, sex of the minor and consensual underage sexual activity have occasionally impaired adequate decision making and judgement. Instead, this has been considered a norm in our society. Element of guilt, shame and socio-stigma influence the societal behaviour towards a better settlement and solution. Child abuse should be given priority as medical social emergency. Each member of child protection team should be made aware of their roles and responsibilities. Strengthening of child protection team can be done through routine and regular training for all involved parties. All government sectors must play their part to achieve similar goals. The success of the collaboration and untangling these issues are directly related to the networking and determination of the agencies to find the appropriate solution for the patients.

In certain clinical context, appropriate settlement may not be reached due to uncertainty surrounding the laws and cultures of the society. Neglected cases have become a challenging spot and remain a grey area in the court of law. In Malaysia, child neglect has yet to be tested. Emotional abuse which constitutes rejecting, terrorizing, isolating, ignoring and corrupting when occurred in sustain manner, has been difficult to recognize due to invariable definition worldwide. There are also many psychosocial factors which are bounded to religious, cultural, custom and ethnical influences. Emotional abuse often coexists with other form of child abuse [9]. There are also challenges in drawing the line where corporal punishment is concerned, as this is the cultural norm in the context of Eastern society. Conflicts such as divorce settlement between the parents, violent caregivers and traumatic experiences such as in war could affect children’s mental health psychologically.

**Children empowerment**

Every child deserves to feel safe and has every right to grow in a healthy environment. Programme that empowers
children, promote family wellbeing and strengthen the community need to be in place. Talian Nur 15999, a 24-hour helpline was introduced in 2007 to address complaints regarding child abuse and in 2010, Childline was set up to attend calls from children [10]. Since the introduction, Talian Nur has received an average of 100 calls per month which included complaint of abuse, violence and mental health. Cases were then liaised with relevant Child Protector. This is a step forward, however it needs to be repeatedly reminded to the community that they have a huge role to report child abuse at its earliest sign. There is still reluctance within the society to report abuse because of the social stigma and shame especially in the case of sexual abuse. Child abuse awareness among the community has increased but the attention from media has been seasonal. Media should be the key player in broadcasting messages and information on child abuse prevention programme.

For many families, sex has been a taboo subject to discuss [5]. Sex education often begins late in the child’s development. Sexually-naive children are a common target and more prone to victimization. The victimization can take in different form such as physical assault, child maltreatment, bullying and sexual abuse. Parents and guardians should realize that in the process of their children’s upbringing, they may have contributed partly to their children’s victimization. Children need to be taught on sexual abuse and the materials need to be age appropriate. These prevention programmes are by the NGOs, government agencies and child protection society’s continuous public awareness through public media. Younger children can easily be taught on good touch and bad touch and their interest in their own body should not be dealt in a negative way. It is difficult for younger children to understand the term ‘good’ and ‘bad’ especially if the abuser has been known as a good person to them [11]. Repetition is the key to ensure better understanding. Supportive modules and teaching materials should encourage a better understanding and empower parents on educating their children at home. School is an ideal setting whereby teachers and counsellors must be able to identify signs of possible abuse and knowing the legal right to act. They should also be reassured that they are protected by law and should not have any fear in reporting child abuse on suspicion ground.

The topic of child abuse and its prevention should be taken seriously and aggressively to educate the community at large. Our society is prone to the culture of silence due to many reasons. Although the initiatives are already in place, government agencies and NGOs should enhance their collaborative partnership to disseminate awareness and prevention programme. Education not only involves the community but retraining the staff, judges and those directly involved in the management of the child abuse. The right and safety of children even outside the scope of discussion such as the homeless, immigrants and undocumented children are paramount to avoid harm of child abuse at all cost. In East Asia, it was reported that economic value lost to these cases has risen to approximately 190 billion, which account for nearly 2% of the regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

**Long term outcome**

There are many long term problems related to child abuse cases which could affect psychological and mental health, leading to aggression, impulsivity, low self-esteem and anxiousness. Children require a loving, peaceful and conducive environment to inculcate positive and healthier development. Children’s brain, behaviour and development are shaped by life experience during the childhood. Violence against children, as a result of
poly-victimization and chronic victimization, has been associated with traumatic psychosocial distress [12]. Persistent exposure of abuse into adulthood is associated with suicide and high risk behaviours, substance abuse, paranoid reaction and borderline personality disorders. Suzaily Wahab et al [13] found depression as common sequelae in the survivor cases of child abuse and those who lived with parents tend to have a better outcome. Modelling behaviour may also result in repeated abuse in the future.

Objective tools must be applied to identify early signs on child abuse in the community. Child victimization questionnaire is reliable enough however must be adapted to different communities. The universal approach is to ensure reported case being dealt swiftly and personnel in charge know and aware of their actions. The definition of child abuse must also be strengthen which covers child begging, street children, child trafficking, child soldier, illegal immigrant and undocumented children, which underline the dilemma of the authority and child protection team.

The Way Forward

We need to revolutionize child abuse prevention programs and think outside the box on how to move these forward. A good example was recently done by the Protect & Save The Children (P.S The Children), a non-governmental association that focused on raising awareness on child sexual abuse. The videos on child sexual abuse were launched in July 2016 and are currently being displayed prior to PG13 movies at all TGV cinemas nationwide. They are also available on YouTube and have been shared by thousands of Malaysians across social media network. While mainstream media should be part of the awareness programs, the use of social media has been proven to be effective in spreading information and knowledge in this day and age. To state another good example - of late, child abuse that has occurred in boarding and religious schools have been widely talked about on social media after this matter was raised by a social activist on his Facebook. Since then, many individuals and parents have written to him about their past experience which he then published on his webpage. This has garnered interest and concern from thousands of cyber public. Thus, healthcare providers should engage with cyber community and bloggers in executing prevention programs and encouraging public to speak up and advocate for the child safety.

Harsher punishment for child abuse perpetrators should prevent child abuse cases, but the question really is, do most perpetrators get convicted? If these cases continue to be dismissed at prosecution office due to lack of physical evidence like perianal or hymen tear, instead of looking at the consistency and effectiveness of the verbal reports by the child victims, then we will not be able to move forward. Evidence of abuse does not require physical signs only but also looking at emotional and psychiatric examination. The raise in awareness in our society needs to be backed up by an efficient prosecution and judiciary system that place children safety as a priority. If we continue failing to convict abusers on this ground, the vicious cycle of abuse and violence will continue to occur.

At present, district hospitals and OSCC at tertiary government hospitals are taking the load of child abuse cases that are brought in by parents, welfare officers, police or even the public. The hospitals serve as a temporary placement for children at risk or when medical treatment is needed. While a 24-hour clinic can be a plan for the future, this would involve a huge cost and additional resources. Our Government Health Clinics should be able
to serve meanwhile. More importantly, the welfare system needs to be strengthened and crucially, the number of well-trained child protectors need to be increased to support the burden of child abuse cases in Malaysia. This includes home visits and follow up as per planned.

Conclusion

Child abuse is an important area but often this has been neglected by healthcare providers and surrounding, due to its sensitive information and social taboo. Further role to enhance collecting evidence for prosecution of the known perpetrator and improvement of case follow up are a must for those involved. There is a need to develop a national child abuse registry to ensure safety of children in this country. Better future is achieved by ensuring our children are developing with care and love, safe from unwanted experience either physically, emotionally, sexually or a form of neglect. Expansion of the role to cover different perspective that violated children’s right should be given attention as we are all advocate for children in Malaysia.

References


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