



• graphic by Aaron Ber

Worse than the disease

Doctors are abusing women and getting away with it

by Jennifer MacIntyre

Suzy (not her real name) thought she might be pregnant. She told her boyfriend and went to her doctor for a pregnancy test. Sure enough, she was three weeks pregnant. The doctor told her the options.

She could have an abortion. But he said there was a chance that she would never be able to have children again, there was a risk of death, and that her feelings of guilt would be tremendous and last her whole life. He then showed her pictures of aborted fetuses. Suzy felt sick to her stomach.

He said she could carry the baby to full term. People would be more than glad to

babysit for her, he claimed, and clothes for herself and the baby would be donated. The doctor told her to think about her options carefully and let him know her decision.

Women who are experiencing an unplanned pregnancy often are in a sensitive emotional state and need supportive, non-judgemental health care. Women must be cautious of religious bias of many doctors and church-affiliated pregnancy support groups. If you feel a doctor is manipulating you or trying to influence your pregnancy options — like Suzy's doctor did — then that doctor is out of

line. You should instead seek the care of a doctor who provides clear information and supports you no matter what decision you make.

Also, your doctor must respect your confidentiality at all times. It is not acceptable for a doctor to call your parents — or anyone else — and tell them you are pregnant unless you have given consent.

Betrayal of trust

Rachael (not her real name) went to the doctor for her yearly pap smear and birth control prescription. She went to a walk-in

clinic, as she was a student from out of town and didn't have a family doctor in Toronto yet.

The doctor, who was male, took an unusually long time with the wooden sample stick. During the procedure there was a knock at the door. He said "Come in." In walked another patient, who was horrified to have been invited into the middle of Rachael's pap smear — as was Rachael, legs up in the stirrups and abruptly half-covered with a piece of examining paper.

The doctor stopped the procedure and walked over to the other patient, who was holding her own medical chart. He then waved his gloved hands — which had been just used for the pap smear — close to the woman's face as he discussed the results of her own earlier examination. She then quickly left the room.

The doctor then resumed the procedure with the stick forcefully. Rachael expressed her pain but he ignored her. When he was done he said: "It appears you have broken a membrane. There should be a pinkish discharge, but that is normal." He then gave Rachael her birth control prescription, and said that he would call if anything was wrong with the pap smear. She ran home to discover that he had in fact made her bleed. She bled for three more days and could not get the horrible scraping feeling out of her mind. She couldn't even think about having sex for weeks.

Experiences like Rachael's are not uncommon among young women. We are socialized to believe that doctors are always right, and we too often allow abusive doctors to take advantage of our trust.

Must be reported

Two weeks ago, Health Minister Frances Lankin announced a plan which will require that all cases of sexual impropriety — which includes words, gestures and attitudes — must be reported to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario. The College as of now mainly focuses on sexual abuses that involve actual touching.

Lankin also made reference to a survey that indicated as many as 400,000 women in Ontario may have been sexually harassed or abused by their doctors.

"Sexual impropriety is not tolerable at all," Lankin told the *Star*. "It has to be reported."

Lankin's announcement came in the wake of a startling 200-page report released last November by the Independent Task Force on Sexual Abuse of Patients.

The task force was created by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario in response to increasingly frequent and severe complaints against doctors.

The report describes sexual abuse by doctors as any behaviour, gestures, or expressions that are seductive or sexually demeaning to a patient or any contact with a patient that could be interpreted as sexual in nature.

It said that too many women are unable to fight back against the abuse they have experienced.

"Patients are vulnerable, trusting, they expect to be protected — and sadly they are easy targets," task force chair person Marilou McPhedran wrote.

"When they are betrayed and used for sexual gratification of a powerful caregiver, they do not want to accept the truth of abuse. They do not want to feel tainted by it. It is a pattern among survivors of sexual abuse — and a normal human response — to deny the abuse, discount it, blame themselves for it, even to return to the caregiver with the hope that it won't be repeated."

dealing with doctors you can't trust — and finding ones you can

A patient who has been violated sexually, psychologically or in any other way by a doctor should be aware that there are several recourses she can take.

First of all she can call The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario at 961-1711. They take formal complaints about any aspect of a doctor's care including rudeness, suspected malpractice or sexual abuse. They will investigate any complaint lodged by a patient and have the authority to take disciplinary action concerning any doctors misconduct.

If abuse goes unquestioned and unreported, it is almost certain that it will continue to happen to other women. It is also important for an abused patient's psychological well-being to speak out to those who can help her so she doesn't internalize the abuse and feel defeated.

More immediately, people who have been abused by doctors — or by anyone else, for that matter — likely will experience severe mental anxiety and depression and will need counselling and support.

One place to call for help is the Assaulted Women's Help Line at 863-0511. This is a confidential telephone support service that provides information and referrals to a variety of support services. Also the Distress Centre at 598-1121 may be able to help.

Finding the right doctor

Fortunately, finding good health care is not as difficult as it may seem. Certainly a recommendation from a friend or relative may direct you to someone trustworthy.

But if that is not possible, you can call The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario Referral Service at 961-1711. They list

doctors who are receiving new patients, and to be listed a doctor must be in good standing with the college.

The Regional Women's Health Centre at 790 Bay St. on the 8th floor (586-0211) is an excellent place to seek help for almost any aspect of women's health.

Here women will be connected with community resources, support groups and individual counsellors for such issues as birth control, infertility, menopause, PMS, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual abuse or unplanned pregnancies. They have a very good library with a wealth

of books, journals, translated materials and audio and video cassettes which registered library clients may borrow.

The heart of the centre is The Bay Centre for Birth Control, famous for its multi-disciplinary group of doctors, nurse-counsellors, social workers, support staff, a STD/HIV counsellor and planned parenthood staff. The centre sells prescription and non-prescription contraceptives at reasonable prices.

The Women's Counselling, Referral and Education Centre, at 534-7501 is a feminist mental health service that gives referrals to "non-sexist" therapists, community services and self-help groups.

Also consider alternative ways of treating your health. Chiropractors, acupuncture, reflexology, acupressure, massage, herbalism and homeopathy are all worthwhile options for treating health problems. What is valuable about most of these alternative forms of medicine is that they tend to concentrate on prevention and maintaining good health whereas traditional western medicine focuses on reacting to poor health and treating illness.

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