

## Introductory remarks

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**C**hild abuse and neglect is a national problem. The exact extent is unknown, but with continued effort in all sectors of society preventive efforts may bring the problem under control.

The dental community must become involved actively in the detection of all phases of abuse and neglect. Not only must we recognize the problem, but we must report, treat, and prevent all potential situations.

Abuse is an overt act of commission by a caretaker—either physical, emotional, or sexual. Neglect is an act of omission or the failure to provide food, shelter, clothing, health care, safety needs, dental care, and supervision. The scope of abuse and neglect knows no social, educational, or financial boundaries. This problem runs throughout the social spectrum.

The abuser is usually someone who has been abused as a child. The coping skills and impulse control of these individuals are not well established and parenting skills need improvement. The abused child is perceived as "different", although the child may be normal in all respects. The child may be the wrong

sex, the second child, or the behavioral expectations may be unrealistic. Also, the child may be born to a single parent or the child could be unwanted and without a support system. It also should be noted that children with disabilities are abused to a greater extent than are normal children.

The crisis which results in abuse may be totally unrelated to the child, or the punishment meted out by the caretaker is out of proportion to the incident. All of these incidents should be reported.

With only a modicum of suspicion concerning an inappropriate history of injury, practitioners are mandated by law to make a report to the proper social agency. Once the report is made, the practitioner is protected by law from liability if reasonable cause was used to make the report. Anonymity also is maintained if requested. Once the social agency receives the report, it is up to them to investigate and establish proof of the claim. Agencies will try to maintain family unity, if possible, so long as the child is not endangered.