The High Cost of Human Trafficking

Barbara A. Moynihan

Extensive attention has not been paid to human trafficking in America until recently, however the magnitude of this humanitarian crisis has been referred to as modern slavery (King, 2004a). Worldwide, it has been estimated that 27 million people are living in slavery and human trafficking has become a $12 billion a year global industry. There are twice as many people enslaved today compared to the African slave trade that lasted for centuries (King, 2004a).

Human trafficking is the movement of people to places for the purpose of forced labor. It is considered slavery because traffickers use deception, threats of violence, and other forms of coercion to force their victims to meet the high demands for sex and cheap labor (King, 2004a). Congresswoman Louise Slaughter (D-NY) in July 2001 stated that “sex trafficking is an egregious practice in and of itself. It is important to be aware that people are being illegally smuggled across borders to work in sweatshops, domestic servitude, or other slavery-like conditions” (King, 2004b, p. 20). According to Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS), “Human trafficking is the ‘perfect crime.’ The chances of being caught are slight, small penalties exist if traffickers are caught and the profits are huge” (King, 2004c, p. 21 [Brownback, 2003, personal communication]).

The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, an annual report required by law to be submitted to Congress on foreign government efforts to eliminate severe forms of human trafficking, serves to expose these despicable practices. This report is used as a diplomatic tool for the United States government as an instrument for continued dialogue, encouragement, and guidance to help focus resources on prosecution, protection, and prevention policies. The Department of Homeland Security hopes the report will be a catalyst for government and nongovernment efforts to combat human trafficking around the world.

Victims of human trafficking pay an immeasurable price. The physical, emotional, and social costs of trafficking have a cascading effect on families, their futures, and their quality of life, and the compounding effects of accommodating to a life without hope. It is difficult to imagine how these “hostages” or “slaves” manage to survive each day.

Effects of Human Trafficking

Human costs of trafficking are yet to be determined. Disease, substance abuse, abortion, suicide, depression, and the psychological effects of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and forced violence are only a few of the possible sequelae of this grave exploitation, whether the victims are children (as young as 3), adolescents, or adults. Human trafficking violates the basic and universal human rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (TIP Report, 2005). The breakdown of the family and loss of support networks (friends, school, etc.) increases vulnerability, contributes to isolation, and lessens the opportunity for rescue or escape. In addition, the profits from human trafficking are closely connected to organized crime and associated with money laundering, drug trafficking, and other legal violations.

Public health implications of human trafficking as a result of the deplorable conditions that victims are subjected to endure include issues previously discussed as well as pelvic inflammatory disease, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS. Health implications include not only those related to the victims but also those who frequent brothels, participate in enslaving victims, or are themselves carriers of disease.

The exact numbers of victims of human trafficking is difficult to assess, however the United States government estimates that approximately 600,000 to 800,000 victims are trafficked across international borders annually, and between 14,500 and 17,500 of

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Forensic Nurse’s Role

What is our role as health care providers and forensic nurse specialists? Assessing and identifying trafficking cases is essential to rescuing victims from a life of desperation and brutality. Seeking legitimate medical care may occur only in cases of severe need, however sensitive and culturally-sensitive questioning may break the silence and afford the victim the opportunity for rescue. As health care providers we have a responsibility to provide comprehensive, holistic, and culturally-sensitive care in a safe setting.

Sample questions that might be asked of a suspected victim include:
1. What type of work do you do?
2. Can you leave your job if you wanted to?
3. Can you come and go as you please?

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004)

Intervention with this ‘imprisoned’ population poses specific challenges including the danger to the victim who discloses and is neither identified nor rescued. The forensic nursing roles support expanding practice to include assessing and identifying victims of human trafficking who present to the sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE), intimate partner violence expert, or the pediatric SANE. The forensic nurse epidemiologist is in a critical position to conduct the research and help develop best practices to address myriad needs posed by human trafficking victims.

Forensic nurses have a distinct responsibility to include and work with law enforcement both locally and nationally to discover the resources available for protecting these victims, and when indicated, to collaborate with immigration services. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution outlaws slavery and involuntary servitude. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) supplements existing laws and establishes new tools and resources to combat trafficking in persons and to provide services and protection for victims.

Conclusion

To begin addressing this area of nursing practice and particularly forensic nursing practice, we must “Look Beneath the Surface” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). The TIP report provides a comprehensive and chilling global perspective on a variety of issues and ramifications of human trafficking. The forensic nurse can and must join in the effort to address this severe and extreme human rights violation and provide the victims a link to freedom.

References
King, G. (2004b). Human trafficking is the perfect crime – the chances of being caught are slight, small penalties exist if traffickers are caught and the profits are huge. [Slaughter, L., 2001].

Selected Resources
U.S. Department of Homeland Security TIP Line
Phone: 866- DHS-2012

The Office on Violence Against Women
Toolkit to End Violence Against Women, Chapter 16: The United States Within the International Community: Responding to Trafficking in Persons

The Office for Victims of Crime
Phone: 800-627-6872

The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000
http://uscis.gov/graphics/services/PL106_386.pdf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Trafficking Information and Referral Hotline
http://www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking/
Phone: 1-888-373-7888

Definitions
Severe Forms of Trafficking of Persons (The Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2000)
- Sex trafficking – recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act
- Commercial sex act – any sex act [during which] anything of value is given to or received by any person
- Involuntary servitude – includes a condition of servitude induced by means of (a) any scheme or plan or pattern intended to cause a person to believe that if the person did not enter into or continue in such a condition that person or another person would suffer serious harm or physical restraint; or (b) abuse or threatened abuse
- Coercion – (a) threats of serious harm to or physical restraint against any person; (b) any scheme, plan, or pattern intended to cause a person to believe that failure to perform an act would result in serious harm to or physical restraint against any person; or (c) the abuse or threatened abuse of the legal process