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## IDENTIFIED SPOUSE ABUSE AS A RISK FACTOR FOR CHILD ABUSE

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### ABSTRACT

**Context:** There are limited data on the extent to which spouse abuse in a family is a risk factor for child abuse.

**Objective:** To estimate the subsequent relative risk of child abuse in families with a report of spouse abuse compared with other families.

**Design:** Cohort study.

**Setting:** Analysis of a centralized US Army database

**Participants:** Married couples with children with at least one spouse on active duty in the US Army during 1989–95.

**Main Outcome Measures:** The US Army Family Advocacy Program's Central Database was used to identify child and spouse abuse. The exposure was an episode of identified spouse abuse and the main outcome was a substantiated episode of subsequent child abuse.

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Doctors Rumm and Krauss were assigned previously to the Department of Preventive Medicine, Madigan Army Medical Center, Tacoma, WA.

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**Results:** During the study period of an estimated 2,019,949 person years, 14,270 incident child abuse cases were substantiated. Families with an incident case of spouse abuse identified during the study period were twice as likely to have a substantiated report of child abuse compared with other military families, rate ratio, 2.0, (95% confidence interval [CI] 1.9–2.1). Young parental age had the highest rate ratio, 4.9 (95% CI 4.5–5.3) in the subgroup analysis controlling for rank. Identified spouse abuse was associated with physical abuse of a child, rate ratio 2.4 (95% CI 2.2–2.5), and with sexual abuse of a child, rate ratio 1.5 (95% CI 1.3–1.7). Identified spouse abuse was not associated with child neglect or maltreatment, rate ratio, 1.0 (95% CI 0.9–1.1).

**Conclusion:** An identified episode of spouse abuse in a family appears to be associated with an increased risk of subsequent child abuse and serves as an independent risk factor. Therefore, care providers should consider the potential risk to children when dealing with spouse abuse. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.

*Key Words*—Spouse abuse, Child abuse, Domestic violence, Military.

## INTRODUCTION

IN 1994, THE National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect received 1,001,628 reports that were either considered to be substantiated or suspected according to the laws of the reporting state (Fingerhut & Warner, 1997). Child abuse has been associated with lower socioeconomic status, less parental education, large families, and young parental age (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980, 1990). Several authors have suggested that an additional risk factor for child abuse is belonging to a family with a history of spouse abuse (Gayford, 1975; Giles-Sims, 1985; McKibben, De Vos, & Newberger, 1989; Ross, 1996; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Straus et al., 1980, 1990).

Two national surveys have suggested that families with spousal violence are more likely to report behaviors consistent with child abuse (Ross, 1996; Straus et al., 1990). Moreover, several case series of battered woman have reported a family prevalence of child abuse as high as 54% (Gayford, 1975; Giles-Sims, 1985).

While these studies have brought attention to the problem of child abuse in families with spouse abuse, they have relied solely on self-reported data or retrospective record reviews. The case series of battered women may have selected women with an atypically high prevalence of child abuse in their families and the studies lacked comparison groups. The temporal sequence of spouse and child abuse episodes was unclear in all studies (Gayford, 1975; Giles-Sims, 1985; McKibben et al., 1989; Ross, 1996; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Straus et al., 1980, 1990).

Since 1975, the US military has had a federally mandated initiative, known as the Family Advocacy Program, to reduce and track abuse. This branch of service has kept a joint database of identified spouse and child abuse episodes since the late 1980s. We analyzed these data to compare the incidence of substantiated child abuse in families with and without identified spouse abuse.

## METHODS

### *Data Sources and Study Sample*

This cohort study analyzed spouse and child abuse data reported from the US Army Medical Command (MEDCOM) Central Registry, during 1989–95. This study was approved by the US Army Medical Command, Madigan Army Medical Center, and by the University of Washington.

### *Abuse Identification and Substantiation*

Reports of spouse or child abuse in the military are made usually by primary care physicians or emergency room personnel and does not differ in this respect from what happens in the civilian sector. Child abuse is reported to the local children's protective service office as well as to the military authorities. Medical personnel are urged by their commanders to report all cases of suspected spouse or child abuse. By federal law, the medical commander at each military

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