

# Riverside County Health Services Agency

## Background

The Riverside County Health Services Agency (HSA) was established in 1991. The agency includes Public Health, Riverside County Regional Medical Center (RCRMC) and Environmental Health. HSA is guided by its mission statement in providing direction, administrative support and oversight for department and hospital organizational entities.

This report is directed toward RCRMC with the main focus on the treatment of alleged victims of sexual abuse brought to the emergency room for physical and forensic examination. The center is committed to the health and well-being of all they serve. Included in its mission statement is the education and training of physicians and all health care professionals to ensure comprehensive medical services.

The California State Office of Criminal Justice Planning developed a training curriculum in 1991 for physical examiners of sexual abuse victims.

The policy statement of the American College of Emergency Physicians states "The sexually assaulted patient presents special medical, psychological and legal needs." The college believes that all sexual abuse victims are entitled to prompt access to emergency medical care and competent collection of evidence to assist in the investigation and criminal prosecution.

Both sources agree that to conduct an adequate adult sexual assault examination the examiner must comply with the standards defined by California Penal Code Section 13823.11 et. seq. (page 102 of Protocol).

Victims of sexual abuse under fourteen are cared for by a team consisting of law enforcement, Child Protective Services and a pediatric physician representative.

## Findings

1. California law mandates that law enforcement notify the Rape Crisis Center of any suspected rape victim. This is sometimes delayed in the emergency room due to incomplete questioning by the hospital triage staff.
2. Some patients have waited many hours in emergency waiting rooms before being examined. This embarrassment further traumatizes the victim and may delay the healing process.
3. The quality of evidence collected is often not adequate for law enforcement to help build a case against the alleged perpetrator.

4. There is an absence of exchange of information between some law enforcement officers, the District Attorney's Office and the hospital staff regarding the sexual abuse victim.

## **Recommendations**

Riverside County Health Services Agency:

1. Train all hospital staff to properly interview patients and to recognize the possibility of rape, consequently notifying law enforcement and the Rape Crisis Center advocate.

2. Continue to provide properly equipped separate examination, waiting and conference room where the patient can be attended by the advocate and afford some privacy. This will help prevent further embarrassment, and release the officer for other duties while waiting for the medical and forensic examinations.

3. Properly train hospital personnel to perform the forensic examination according to recommended protocol. An alternative is to contract with an outside firm of nurses with forty hours or more training, to be called to perform these examinations and testify in court when needed. This would also help prevent the victim from being further traumatized by an inadequately-trained medical person.

4. Hold informational meetings frequently between the office of the District Attorney, law enforcement, Rape Crisis Center advocate and all hospital personnel involved.