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Slipping Through the Cracks: Receptivity of healthcare professionals to an electronic screening tool for human trafficking

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Introduction

- Human trafficking is the exploitation of an individual through force or coercion, for labor or services, including commercial sex.
- Healthcare providers are uniquely positioned to encounter trafficked people.1
- Prior research has found a need for increased sensitivity in identifying trafficked persons in healthcare settings, and for provider education about the issue.3

Objectives

- Assess healthcare worker receptivity to the implementation of an electronic screening tool for human trafficking in various clinical settings.
- Identify barriers to implementation of current screening practices.
- Promote awareness among healthcare workers about the prevalence of human trafficking and the potential signs of trafficking among their patients.

Methods

- Participants included 26 healthcare practitioners selected via convenience sampling.
- Surveys with Likert scale and open-ended responses were administered in person.
- Each participant encounter included an introduction to a prototypical electronic screening tool (pictured below),3 and an educational discussion about human trafficking.

Our sample included:
- 15 Primary care physicians
- 4 Emergency Dept. physicians
- 3 Nurses
- 3 Emergency medical technicians
- 1 Physician assistant

Results

- Our clinic/hospital has an existing protocol for identifying people at risk of trafficking.
- 34% of participants agreed, 46% somewhat agreed, 0% neither agree nor disagree, 12% somewhat disagree, and 15% strongly disagreed.

- The issue of human trafficking has been addressed in my professional training.
- 31% strongly agreed, 19% somewhat agreed, 23% neither agree nor disagree, 0% somewhat disagree, and 4% strongly disagreed.

- I am unsure of what do if I encounter a trafficked person, or someone at risk, in my practice.
- 46% strongly disagreed, 31% somewhat disagreed, 0% neither agree nor disagree, 12% somewhat agree, and 4% strongly agree.

- The screening tool (or a similar electronic screening tool) would help providers to identify trafficking victims.
- 92% responded that such a tool would help them identify trafficking victims, 7% somewhat disagreed, 0% neither agree nor disagree, 4% strongly disagreed, and 4% strongly agreed.

- There should be a standardized way for healthcare workers to screen for trafficking victims.
- 30% strongly disagreed, 45% somewhat disagreed, 12% neither agree nor disagree, 15% somewhat agree, and 2% strongly agree.

- This screening tool (or a similar electronic screening tool) would be difficult to integrate into my usual daily practice.
- 41% strongly disagreed, 31% somewhat disagreed, 12% neither agree nor disagree, 4% somewhat agree, and 4% strongly agree.

- This screening tool (or a similar electronic screening tool) would be useful in a healthcare setting.
- 92% responded that such a tool would be useful, 7% somewhat disagreed, 0% neither agree nor disagree, 4% strongly disagreed, and 4% strongly agreed.

- There were no major barriers to implementation.
- 58% strongly agreed, 15% somewhat agreed, 23% neither agree nor disagree, 4% somewhat disagreed, and 0% strongly disagreed.

- A shorter form of the screening tool with a few sensitive questions could improve on screening methods currently in place.
- 78% responded that such a tool would help improve on screening methods currently in place, 12% somewhat disagreed, 4% neither agree nor disagree, 4% strongly disagreed, and 0% strongly agreed.

- The screening tool (or a similar electronic screening tool) was easy to use.
- 61% strongly agreed, 31% somewhat agreed, 4% neither agree nor disagree, 4% somewhat disagreed, and 0% strongly disagreed.

- The screening tool was easy to use.
- 61% strongly agreed, 31% somewhat agreed, 4% neither agree nor disagree, 4% somewhat disagreed, and 0% strongly disagreed.

- I found the screening tool to be too complex.
- 0% strongly agreed, 15% somewhat agreed, 23% neither agree nor disagree, 12% somewhat disagreed, and 46% strongly disagreed.

- Ease of Use of this Application as a Possible Screening Tool

Discussion

- The healthcare providers had a positive opinion of the usefulness of the electronic screening tool, with 92% responding that such a tool would help providers identify victims.
- Implementation would need to address the time constraints, provider buy-in, and primary care ‘screening fatigue’ that some providers identified as barriers.
- The survey itself served as a valuable source of education for healthcare providers. However, educating healthcare providers remains essential.
- A shorter form of the screening tool with a few sensitive questions could prompt the use of more specific methods of identification.
- Future direction: pilot testing of the application in a clinical setting.

Common themes in open-ended responses

Awareness and education:

- “Education for providers is lacking and outreach across the state is essential.”
- “If nothing else, tools like this raise the awareness of providers who are then more likely to recognize the victims of human trafficking.”
- “Given the low prevalence of human trafficking, I feel that this would subject many patients to a long screen in the waiting room for a relatively rare situation.”
- “Trying to carve out time and space and hardware could be challenging... also considering that we are being asked to screen for many things in primary care and DO something about it: depression, suicide, obesity, DM, HTH, activity level, etc.”
- “I think that maybe 5 well-chosen questions would be better.”

Barriers for implementation:

- “If providers feel it is not a problem that occurs frequently, they will not feel it is relevant.”
- “I felt confident about my use of the screening tool.”
- “I think this has potential. It could be a good option on a mobile device to be administered while someone is waiting in the exam room. Somewhere private. Sometimes the victims are accompanied by the perpetrator so giving them a safe place would be essential.”

Suggestions for the screening tool:

- “I think this could be a valuable source of education for healthcare providers. However, educating healthcare providers remains essential.”
- “A shorter form of the screening tool with a few sensitive questions could prompt the use of more specific methods of identification.”
- “Future direction: pilot testing of the application in a clinical setting.”

References:


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