Does child abuse influence subsequent sexual behaviour and risk of AIDS?

Sir – We are concerned about the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Italy. It is approaching 5%, which is similar to estimates (from 1–5%) for other western societies.1 This implies that in Italy about 450,000 children aged 0–14 years and a similar number aged 15–24 years (data from the census of 1991) are sexually abused each year. It has been estimated that in 1994 in the USA about three million children were abused.2 We are also concerned about the effect that this abuse may have in later life. Indeed, sexually abused children exhibit behavioural indicators such as: bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual behaviour or knowledge; seductive or promiscuous behaviour; poor peer relationships; prostitution; forcing sexual acts on other children; truancy; and self-injurious behaviour.3

In a national survey concerned with sexual behaviour which was based on a random sample of young Italian adults in 10 cities, there was a specific question about child abuse.4 The anonymised questionnaire was posted to a randomly selected sample of 8604 men and women – 1% of the total population aged 19–24.

Altogether 2776 questionnaires have been returned completed so far. A possible association between child abuse and risk behaviour, was looked for among the 1339 males. Sixty four (4.7%) of them had experienced sexual abuse during childhood. Even given the limitations of the data obtained, the prevalence of child abuse that is nearly 5% is alarming.

More of those who were abused in childhood were already sexually experienced (86%) than those not abused (68%) (odds ratio OR = 2.97, 95% confidence interval 95% CI) 1.27,6.96). They were also more likely to have engaged the services of a prostitute (23% versus 11%) (OR = 2.35, 95% CI 1.28,4.31). Even when only those males who were sexually experienced were considered, those who had been abused had an OR of 2.27 (95% CI 1.21–4.26) for having experienced sex with prostitutes (29% versus 15%). The tendency to use prostitutes seems to be independent of the tendency to be sexually experienced. Although based on relatively small numbers, the chance of developing homosexual or bisexual tendencies is markedly increased (9.4% versus 0.5%) (OR = 22.38, 95% CI 6.63,75.49). These activities are also known risk factors for HIV infection.

It seems from these preliminary results that sexual abuse in childhood is a trauma which has a lasting effect on psycho-sexual development in adolescence and ultimately in adulthood. Although, the data should be considered with caution because of the possibility of confounding, campaigns aimed at limiting child sexual abuse may have important consequences for AIDS prevention as well.

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