

Chapter 1. Introduction to child abuse assessments

Reading:

David TJ. Avoiding pitfalls when writing medical reports for court proceedings in cases of suspected child abuse. *Arch Dis Child*. 2004; 89: 799-804

A: Overview

The job of a general pediatrician calls for them to consider child maltreatment in appropriate situations, assess whether suspicion is reasonable, and report reasonably based suspicions to appropriate authorities. Depending on the situation and the individual, a certain amount of “work up” may be performed in evaluating suspicion for reasonableness, but there is no need to be certain of the maltreatment diagnosis before reporting the case. Another role is that of prevention. Parental education on normal growth and development, safe handling of babies and available community resources has long been part of high quality pediatric care, and helps prevent abuse. Screening parents for the risk factors of depression and domestic violence is a new role for pediatricians, but may contribute to the prevention of neglect and abuse.

A CHAMP physician must go beyond the responsibilities of the general pediatrician. In most cases, suspicion will already have been generated prior to the CHAMP physician’s involvement. The goal of the CHAMP physician is to provide the best medical intelligence to the agencies that must protect maltreated children. A CHAMP assessment will be most helpful when it achieves one of three things.

1. The CHAMP assessment may result in a reasonably certain diagnosis of child maltreatment. Such an assessment should be complete and well supported. The manner of abuse should be specified or confined to a limited number of possibilities. Medical indicators to the timing of the abuse should be pointed out. The CHAMP physician should be aware of an evidentiary basis for these determinations, both in clinical experience, and in the literature. Reasonable differential diagnoses should be considered and excluded.
2. The CHAMP assessment may result in a reasonable exclusion of child maltreatment. Such an assessment requires an alternative hypothesis that explains the child’s condition. A non-inflicted trauma or medical diagnosis should be evident that explains the findings, is consistent with the given history, and is either supported by clear evidence or significantly more likely than child maltreatment.
3. Finally, the CHAMP assessment may illuminate a remaining diagnostic dilemma. Available evidence may leave the CHAMP physician uncertain if an injury was inflicted or not. A list of plausible differential diagnoses is a reasonable outcome of a CHAMP assessment. It may be helpful to estimate which diagnoses appear more, or most likely. If a medical process can resolve remaining ambiguity, it should be elaborated.

B. Tools, process and product

The performance of this task will rely on three tools: the collection of subjective and objective evidence; knowledge of the epidemiology, mechanics, physiology and differential diagnosis of maltreatment; and an analytic method to merge evidence and knowledge and produce a reliable, valid opinion.

All this starts with a thorough history and physical examination. A structured encounter form will assist in thoroughness and reproducibility, but should not limit creativity nor confine the extent of examination or history taking. It is very difficult to get child abuse physicians to explain how they analyze the data and come up with their assessment. We will attempt to formulate a method, but this is not intended to restrict the experienced CHAMP physician who has developed their own clinical approach. The product will be a written opinion submitted to the consulting agency, typically child protective services (CPS). If opinions are not well expressed, legible and intelligible to the intended audience they are useless, or worse, misleading. If photographs or videos are ill composed, exposed or focused, they will not refresh the CHAMP physician's memory in court, or adequately convey findings to a social worker, police officer, attorney, outside consultant, judge, or jury member. Quality, timely documentation is as important as assiduous assessment and insightful analysis.