

By Susan Clairmont
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Think dirty.

Think about the disgusting things adults can do to children. Think about bondage. And oral sex. And biting.

Once you force yourself to go there, you can detect signs of child abuse.

And then you can do something about it.

For three hours last week, Dr. Frank Stechey, an expert in forensic dentistry, guided 600 Mohawk College students through the unpleasant, but necessary task of -- as he puts it -- thinking dirty. Students planning careers in early childhood education, social work, recreation and other professions that involve youth, were taught how to look at teeth, tongues, mouths, lips and bite marks, to determine if a child was abused.

The youngest abuse victim Stechey has examined was seven days old.

The Hamilton family dentist is a leading expert in forensic dentistry. He was the only Canadian dentist at Ground Zero, involved in the painstaking task of identifying the dead by tooth fragments.

He travels across the country as an expert witness at rape, abuse and murder trials. He is part of a multi-disciplinary team of local police, doctors and others working to determine symptoms of abuse and neglect.

The images Stechey shows are graphic. Many are of children in our own community. The toddler whose precious new baby teeth are black and yellow, and rotted from decay. It doesn't matter that those teeth will be replaced. Right now, that child is suffering. She can't chew. Can't concentrate. Can't learn to speak properly. She has been neglected.

There is a baby in a diaper sitting in a hospital crib. Her two black eyes are obvious signs she has been abused. But there are also bite marks on her forehead and arm.

"Can I tell you who punched Susie in the face?" Stechey asks. "No way. Can I tell you who bit her? Oh yes."

Bruises from a bite will appear 24 to 36 hours later. First, Stechey looks at the mark to determine if it is caused by a human. The mark from the lower jaw will be darker, because it is the most powerful. Then he determines if it was caused by an adult. A child biting another child is not a crime. An adult biting a child is. An adult bite mark will measure about three centimetres from eye tooth to eye tooth.

Next, Stechey will use photographs and computer technology to enhance the bite and develop a model of the biter's mouth. He will work with police to get search warrants to obtain wax dental impressions from suspects or do comparisons with their dental X-rays.

In the case of a murdered child, Stechey says police should make impressions of the victim's teeth as part of the post mortem process, in case the child's mouth can be matched with bites found on the suspected killer.

There is a photo of a baby with a bite on his belly, next to a cigarette burn. That bite mark was caused by a set of dentures. The dentures were traced back to the elderly man who wore them.

A young boy's lips are swollen to the point of bursting. There is blood in his nostrils and on his chin. He didn't fall from his bike. He was thrown into a door. The injuries to his face line up to match the edge of the door.

One young patient of Stechey's came in for a checkup with her two front teeth discoloured. That is a sign that the nerves had undergone a trauma. That the teeth had been hit by something, some time ago. Stechey did as he is legally obligated to do, and reported the suspected abuse to Hamilton Police. An officer and a Children's Aid Society worker paid a visit to the child's home. When they got there, they heard screaming. The cop broke down the door and interrupted a beating.

There was a 12-year-old girl with a venereal wart in her mouth.

Certain hemorrhage patterns on a child's tongue is indication they have performed fellatio. One local dental hygienist was at an area school, checking students' mouths for cavities, when she came to a boy with bruising in the back of his throat and roof of his mouth. She reported it, an investigation ensued, and it was discovered that a 14-year-old schoolmate had been forcing the boy to give him oral sex.

A young female patient of Stechey's came to his office with severely chapped lips and dry skin on her chin. She said it was from skiing. But it was still there when she came back six months later. Stechey reported it. It turned out she'd been performing oral sex on a family member several times a day and would vigorously wipe her mouth and chin afterward.

Stechey arms his audience with enough knowledge to question injuries they may see on children. He reminds them that if they suspect child abuse, they must report it to the authorities -- either the police, the CAS or Crime Stoppers. If the suspicion is wrong, there is no penalty, unless the false report was made maliciously.

"Each one of you is another set of eyes out there looking out for our children," he says.

Susan Clairmont's commentary appears regularly in The Spectator.
sclairmont@thespec.com 905-526-3539

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