

Domestic Violence in the KP Workplace: Letter from a Physician Survivor

By Marta Moreno, MD

Putting this story on paper has been one of the hardest things I have ever done. I'm a doctor in Internal Medicine at a Kaiser Permanente (KP) Northern California facility, where I've been for almost 15 years. My story began with my father, who was an abuser. I put an end to my story of abuse when my husband hurt me in front of my children, although he claims it was inadvertent. I hope to break the cycle.

I stayed in my marriage because of fear and shame: fear of losing my children; shame for allowing the abuse to continue. I stayed in my marriage as long as my children never witnessed the physical abuse. When my husband hurt me in front of them, I called the police. I may never know

how the verbal and emotional abuse will affect my children.

After that breaking point, I spent sleepless weeks filled with anxiety and depression before I went to the doctor at a KP teaching facility. A resident introduced me to an intern, who walked me to someone else's office. After five to ten awkward and uncomfortable minutes, I was handed two to three pages of phone numbers to call if I felt my life was in danger.

Still searching for help, I called the Psychiatry Department. After begging for an appointment, I was scheduled to see the on-call psychologist. In his box-filled office, this psychologist barely listened to or looked at me while he packed. After what seemed like for-

ever, he finally looked at me and said, "Don't worry. You're pretty. You will find someone else soon." I was stunned, and I felt abused all over again.

I finally had the courage, despite the shame, to talk to a coworker, who referred me to the KP Richmond facility. My expectations were low, but I needed help. At the Richmond facility, someone listened. I was given direction as to what I needed to do to help myself, both emotionally and physically. Their concern for my children was also most helpful. I needed to learn that the abuse was not my fault and that there is absolutely no excuse for abusive behavior. Therapy was arranged, and calls were made to my home just to make sure I was okay. Later, when I was emotionally well enough, I attended group sessions, which is an ongoing process to this day.

Shame, fear, and blame keep the abused from seeking help. Looking back, I realize, I needed to know I wasn't alone. I needed guidance on where to go, whom to call, and what to do. I needed more than a list of phone numbers. Without specific direction, many of us feel overwhelmed and go back to our situation. It is extremely hard to seek help; when we do, help should be available.

As a physician, I'm not sure I would have known what to do with a patient in my situation. By sharing my story, I hope that other clinicians will have a better sense of what patients experiencing abuse are going through and what kind of help these patients need. ❖



Silent Witness Display—Domestic Violence is a Workplace Issue

Displayed on several life-sized, panels are the stories of KP staff and clinicians who have experienced domestic violence. This Silent Witness Display shows the courage and survival of these KP employees and describes the resources that were important in helping them break free from domestic violence. The Silent Witness Display was unveiled at the Northern California Regional Offices in January 2004 and has been extremely well received. The Silent Witness Display is currently booked at facilities through 2005; for more information, call the Family Violence Prevention Program (FVPP) at 510-987-4493, or e-mail: brigid.mccaw@kp.org.

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