

Opinion: Putting the spotlight on domestic violence

By Ellen R. Shaffer

Her husband described the abuse: “I would hold her hostage and terrorize her.” The Kaiser patient reported how she finally decided to leave: “I’ll never forget the office visit when my physician said, ‘I’m afraid if your husband doesn’t kill you, the stress will.’ ”

Last week’s groundbreaking decision by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to require health plans to cover domestic violence counseling without requiring a co-pay will give women and their health care providers an important new incentive to call out the distress signals of abuse, and to take action.

Domestic violence is a widespread, harmful and expensive public health issue. Public awareness campaigns, advocacy groups and laws offer support and a way out, but too many individuals remain isolated and stigmatized. Every year, 2 million women experience domestic violence, more than new cases of breast cancer or deaths from cardiovascular disease. Also:

- More than three women a day are murdered by current or former husbands or boyfriends.
- Homicide is the second-leading cause of injury-related death among pregnant women.
- 6.5 percent of California women report physical violence by a partner in the past year.
- 24 percent of U.S. women have experienced physical domestic

abuse at some point in their lives. Domestic violence can include threats, isolation, humiliation, unwanted sexual activities and limiting access to financial resources.

– Women who experience domestic violence, and children who witness it in the home, also suffer from an array of long-term mental health and medical conditions. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the economic burden of domestic violence in the United States is \$8 billion per year in direct medical costs and lost productivity.

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