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Long-Term Effects of Violence on Women: Bowel Disease, Arthritis to Be Studied

VANCOUVER (CP) – After the blood on a rape victim has dried and the wounds bandaged, the health problems seem to mount: bowel disease, arthritis, depression – all diseases believed to be caused by the stress of the attack.

Researchers from across the country have embarked on a \$1.3-million project to find out exactly how deep the health and economic consequences of leaving an abusive partner cuts.

“We are astounded by the number of health problems suffered by the women we are seeing,” said Colleen Varcoe, a University of Victoria nursing professor and principal investigator in the study.

“They have very high uses of prescription drugs, from blood pressure medications, drugs for depression, skin problems.

“Women who have been abused are relatively high users of health-care resources and we want to know more about that. What exactly are the long term effects? What programs can we create to help them get their lives back?”

The study by nurses, economists and sociologists will follow 300 abuse victims of partner violence for four years.

It is the first time their long-term financial and physical well-being has been examined, said Varcoe, who joined forces with teams at the University of New Brunswick, the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont., and Vancouver’s Simon Fraser University.

After a women leaves a violent relationship, her income typically drops by 37 per cent while the man’s income improves by about 11 per cent.

“Leaving an abusive partner means moving costs and all the stress that comes with that and often the sole responsibility for childcare provision. That takes a toll,” Varcoe said.

Women in B.C. are having a harder time getting back on their feet after the elimination of funding to women's centres that helped them with counselling, job training and accessing legal aid.

Suzanne Jay, a spokeswoman for Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter, said she can only imagine what kind of pressure that puts on a victim's mental and physical health.

"We're not doctors. We deal with immediate needs and often wonder how these women will be in 10 years. It's about time we had some support to assess that so we can help them," she said.

Varcoe said she will try to determine whether women who have endured more attacks suffer more health problems down the road and are more impoverished than women who have been exposed to violence that was less severe.

The researchers have had an amazing response from women who have been asked in newspaper ads and poster campaigns to participate in the study, which is being funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health research.

"They really just want to help other women who are going through the same thing. It's less about a desire to understand what is happening to them," Varcoe said.

The sample of Canadian women will be compared against a massive control group drawn from a U.S. database.

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