

# Correlates of Medical and Legal Help Seeking among Women who Experienced Intimate Partner Violence

Erin E Duterte

**Background:** Seeking help from medical and legal professionals is a common step for women who have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV). Prior studies have shown a positive association between exposure to physical IPV and exposure to severe IPV and seeking help in medical and legal venues. No study, to our knowledge, has simultaneously examined the relationships between IPV type, severity and duration and help seeking in medical and legal venues.

**Objective:** To examine the relationship between IPV type, severity, and duration and self reported use of medical and legal services among abused women.

**Design:** Cross-sectional telephone survey

**Setting and population:** 1509 women randomly selected from a health maintenance organization. To be eligible women had to be between the ages of 18 and 64, health plan members for at least three years, and exposed to IPV in their adult lifetime.

**Exposures:** Self reported IPV type, severity, and duration

**Outcomes:** Medical help seeking (hospital, physician, dental, ambulance/paramedic, urgent care, physical therapy, or mental health counseling) or legal help seeking (ever seeking a protection order or restraining order or calling the police in the past five years about any type of physical abuse or forced sex by an intimate partner) because of intimate partner violence.

**Results:** Compared to women who experienced non-physical IPV only, women who experienced physical IPV were 1.5 times more likely to help in medical or legal venues and women who experienced sexual IPV were 1.3 times as likely to seek help. Women who experienced sexual IPV were 1.3 times more likely to seek medical help. Women who experienced physical IPV or sexual IPV were 3.2 times and 1.6 times as likely, respectively, to seek legal help.

Physically abused women had increased rates of help seeking with increasing severity of physical IPV (relative risk range, 1.4 for women who reported slightly severe physical IPV to 2.5 for women with extremely severe physical IPV). Sexually abused women were more likely to seek medical or legal help with increasing sexual IPV severity (relative risk range, 1.1 for women reporting slightly severe sexual IPV to 1.3 for women who reported the highest severity). Longer physical IPV duration was associated with increased likelihood of seeking help.

**Discussion:** This was the first study, to our knowledge, to empirically determine that longer duration of physical IPV was associated with formal help seeking. It is important for health care providers and law enforcement personnel to understand that women who present themselves in these settings may have been exposed to severe and long-lasting violence.

## Thesis Committee:

Mary A Kernic, Ph.D., MPH

Amy E Bonomi, Ph.D., MPH

Melissa Schiff, MD, MPH

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