

## **Health Implications and Health Care Challenges Associated with Prostitution**

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### Session Objectives:

Upon completion of this session, the participants will be able to:

1. Discuss the health problems and concerns of women prostitutes
2. Identify recommendations for health care services

Women who are marginalized by poverty and/or substance abuse frequently exchange sex for survival needs including food, shelter, and drugs. Traditionally concern regarding the health problems of prostitutes has focused on the potential for women to transmit sexually transmitted diseases including HIV to their clients and their subsequent partners—in other words, prostitutes are viewed as vectors of disease. It is essential that the public in general and health care providers specifically refocus this view to a concern for the women themselves.

Health care problems often associated with prostitution include violence and abuse, substance abuse, mental health concerns, infections, chronic health problems, and survival needs. Pervasive violence including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse are a hallmark of the women's past and present lives. Alcohol and drug addiction also are common, particularly cocaine, crack, and heroin. Feelings of stigma associated with the nature and illegal status of their work are commonly reported by sex workers, as are depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and dissociative disorder. In addition, high rates of self-destructive behavior such as suicide and self-mutilation have been documented.

In addition to the high rates of sexually transmitted diseases experienced by prostitutes, other infections associated with close contact with other persons such as pneumonia, TB, and scabies have been reported. Women prostitutes also report injuries associated with physical violence including fractures, concussion, burns, and back pain. In addition the incidence of gynecological conditions such as pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, ovarian cysts, chronic pelvic pain, and positive pap smears are higher than in the general population of women. Women prostitutes commonly experience inadequate or no access to health care including obstetrical services. In addition, even when they are able to access health care, they often are unable to follow instructions for care due to the uncertain, chaotic nature of their daily life.

Findings from the speaker's current research with women prisoners, many of whom exchange sex for drugs or money, were presented to illustrate the health care problems and concerns identified.

Challenges and recommendations for Health Care Providers and Services include:

- The challenge of providing health care to women prostitutes is inextricably intertwined with the effects of substance abuse and violence. Thus the importance of knowing your patient and addressing her health care within the context of her life circumstances cannot be overemphasized. Health care providers must screen sensitively for the complex problems that threaten the health of women prostitutes.
- Because sex work is a women prostitute' s major source of income, comprehensive case management services must be made available to the woman.
- Health care services should be available and accessible; that is, they must be provided by health care professionals who are nonjudgmental and at places and times where the women can access them.
- Health care services need to include primary health, mental health, and obstetrical care services, in addition to the more typical STD screening and treatment services.