

## Child Abuse Experience in Al Ain District, United Arab Emirates

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**Received:** October 01, 2017; **Published:** October 30, 2017

### Abstract

The aim of the study is to highlight the burden of suspected child abuse and neglect (CAN) cases in Al Ain City in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in order to increase awareness about child protection. Retrospective study of data from the medical records of all children who presented to Tawam and Al Ain Hospitals with suspicion of child abuse or neglect between January 2013 and December 2015. A total of 113 children fulfilled the criteria. CAN was confirmed in 72 (62.8%) children whereas the remaining 42 (37.3%) had insufficient evidence to support that diagnosis. The age of the patients ranged from birth to 15 years (58% males). We found that, in some cases, the complete process of reporting was not followed and there were differences between the two hospitals. In Conclusion child abuse and neglect exists in the UAE but there is deficiency in reporting by the treating physicians. This can be attributed to lack of training in child protection or hesitancy of physicians to report these cases and to follow the hospital policy. There is a need for further training of all clinical staff dealing with children in their practice.

**Keywords:** Child Abuse; Child Physical Abuse; Child Sexual Abuse; Child Neglect; Al Ain

### Abbreviations

CAN: Child Abuse and Neglect; CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; UAE: United Arab Emirates; NIS-4: Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect; AAH: Al Ain Hospital

### Introduction

Child abuse and neglect (CAN) is a universal problem. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines child maltreatment as “any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential harm, or the threat of harm to a child” [1].

Child abuse and neglect is a main public health and social problem with upsetting short and long term complications. Most children will expose to minor injuries but on the other hand some of them will have sever and life threatening complications which may lead to death. Long term complications of CAN could be either physical illness or mental health problems which can happen even after 50 years after exposing to abuse [2].

In the USA, the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) concluded that one child every 58 of American children are exposed to maltreatment with 44% of them reported to have been abused and approximately 61% were neglected [3]. While in the Arab region CAN was documented in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman and Yemen which was showed by a study that done to provide an overview of the problem and patterns of child abuse and neglect in the seven countries of the Arabian Peninsula [4],

confirming that child abuse and neglect do exist in the Arab countries. Although the media in the UAE has been recently reporting cases of CAN in the country, it is surprising that no publications on child abuse in the UAE were found in Medline or WHO Index Medicus for the Eastern Mediterranean Region [4]. Under reporting of these cases by physicians could be a contributing factor. The exact magnitude of the problem remains therefore unknown.

### Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to highlight the magnitude of suspected child abuse and neglect (CAN) cases in 2 main hospitals in Al Ain City in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in order to increase awareness about child protection.

### Materials and Methods

This is a descriptive retrospective study approved by the Al Ain Medical District Human Research Ethics committee (HREC) (CRD 441/16). Data collection was based on a search in medical records of patients from Tawam and Al Ain Hospitals, two tertiary governmental hospitals. Medical records inclusion criteria were: children age from birth to 15 years of age, admission to either hospital between January 2013 and December 2015 and having diagnosed with any of the following: child abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, shaken baby syndrome, drowning, poisoning, fracture, bruises, retinal hemorrhage, burn, lacerations, and vaginal bleed. Exclusion of the accidental cases was done by the three investigators after thorough review of the files. Data analysis was performed with the SPSS package for Windows (version 23) and also by Microsoft Excel program.

### Results and Discussion

#### Results

A total of 113 cases were suspected to have child abuse and neglect. CAN was conformed in 72 (62.8%) children whereas the remaining 42 (37.3%) had insufficient evidence to support that diagnosis. The age of the children ranged from birth to 15 years, 40% of them were below 2years old, 44% were aged between 2 and 12 years old and the rest 15% were above the age of 12 years. Around 58% of abused children were males. A total of 78 (69%) children were Emiratis and 31 (27%) were non-national. Physical abuse was the most prevalent form of CAN and was noted in 68 (60%) of children followed by 23 (20%) cases of neglect and 22 (19.5%) cases of sexual abuse. A small proportion of children (4%) suspected to have CAN had an underlying disability. Most of patients were discharged home (92%) and around 1.7% (2) died.

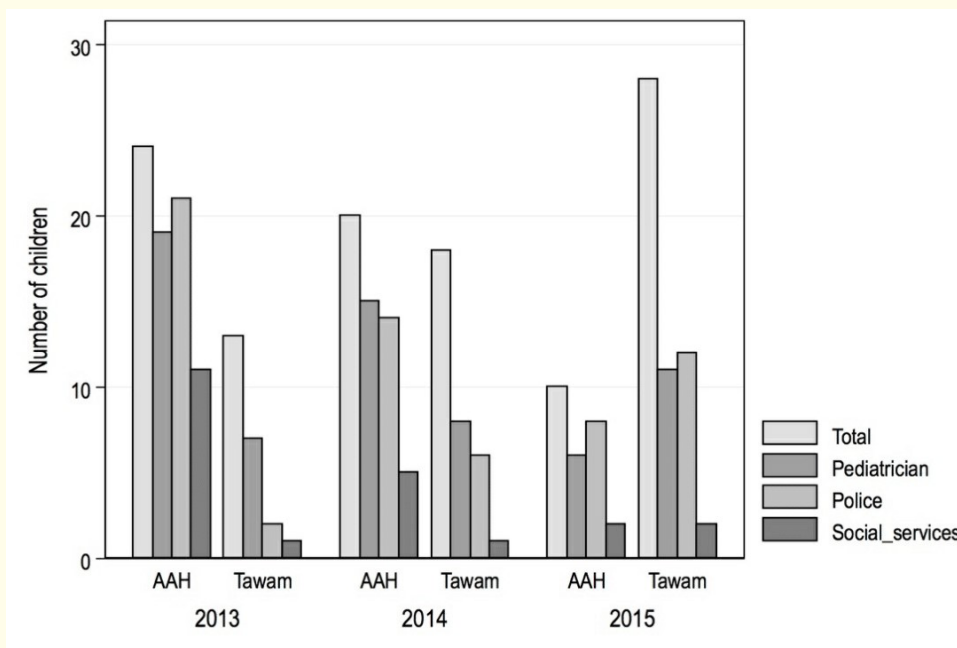
The majority of the cases (80%) were first reported by the emergency department. However, not all cases went through the whole process of reporting and this was different between the two hospitals, as illustrated in table 1, with Al Ain hospital (AAH) having a significantly better reporting mechanism (pediatrician, police and social worker involvement) than Tawam hospital (P < 0.05). From 2013 till 2015, although the proportion of reported suspected cases of CAN decrease, especially at AAH, the trend was not statistically significant (Table 2 and figure 1).

	AAH N = 54	Tawam N = 59	P value*
Pediatrician involved	40 (74)	26 (44)	0.002
Police involved	43 (79)	20 (34)	< 0.001
Social service involved	18 (33)	4 (7)	0.001
AAH (Al Ain hospital); Tawam (Tawam hospital)			
*Chi square test			

**Table 1:** Disciplines involved in suspected cases of CAN in the two hospitals. Number (%) of children.

Hospital	Year	Type of abuse				Cases involving		
		Neglect	Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	Total	Pediatrician	Police	Social services
AAH	2013	3	11	10	24	19 (79)	21 (88)	11 (46)
	2014	4	11	5	20	15 (75)	14 (70)	5 (25)
	2015	2	3	5	10	6 (60)	8 (80)	2 (20)
Trend over three years				*P value	0.5	0.3	0.2	
Tawam	2013	8	5	0	13	7 (54)	2 (15)	1 (8)
	2014	3	14	1	18	8 (44)	6 (33)	1 (6)
	2015	3	24	1	28	11 (39)	12 (43)	2 (7)
Trend over three years				*P value	0.1	0.2	0.9	
AAH (Al Ain hospital); Tawam (Tawam hospital) * Chi square test								

**Table 2:** Disciplines involved in suspected cases of CAN in the two hospitals from 2013 till 2015. Number (%) of children.



**Figure 1:** Number of abused children and distribution of involved professionals in the two hospitals between 2013 and 2015.

Surprisingly our study showed that not all suspected physical and sexual abuse cases were admitted to the hospital (Table 3). Furthermore, a significantly higher proportion of cases were admitted to Al Ain hospital in comparison to Tawam hospital, perhaps because of a better reporting mechanism in the former. Although a child protection team is well established in Al Ain hospital, only five (26%) of the cases which were admitted had a case conference held.

	AAH	Tawam	P value*
Physical abuse	13/25 (52)	8/43 (18)	0.006
Sexual abuse	2/20 (10)	1/2 (50)	0.2
AAH (Al Ain hospital); Tawam (Tawam hospital) * Chi square test			

**Table 3:** Number/Total (%) of children admitted to the two hospitals with suspected CAN.

### Discussion

The previously held belief that child abuse is uncommon in Arab countries is unfortunately not true, as shown by the published data from the Arab region. In the Gulf countries, reports began to surface in the 1980s and early 1990s [5]. Our study confirms that CAN also exists in the UAE. Comparing this to US, in 2012, there were a nationally estimated 686,000 victims of abuse and neglect, resulting in a rate of 9.2 victims per 1,000 children in the population 6 with 59% of abused and neglected children being male. This is similar to a study done in Bahrain that showed males represented 58% and females 42% of the abused children [7]. Those are different than what was reported in US where they found the percentages of child victims were similar for both boys (48.7) and girls (50.9) [6]. All of these data represent a departure from international data which indicate that females were the main victims in CAN [8]. The exact cause is unclear; some cultural factors may play a role. Further studies are needed to understand this phenomenon [7].

Two third of the children whom we have reported were diagnosed to have been physically abused, with the remaining third divided equally between neglected and sexually abused. This was similar to a study of 188 cases conducted in Riyadh medical city showed that physical abuse composed the majority of cases (48.9%) followed by neglect (32.3%) and then sexual abuse (15%), with emotional abuse representing the remaining children (3.8%) [9]. On the other hand, in the USA, more than three-quarters (78.3%) of the victims were neglected, 18.3% physically abused, and 9.3% sexually abused [6]. This variation can be attributed to the fact that our data was collected from hospital records, where the majority of cases are physical abuse because the family will seek medical advice. The number of neglected or sexually abused children can be underestimated due to cultural stigma, social perception of abuse or underreporting.

While in the USA, 13.3% of the victims have been reported to have had a disability [6], we found that only 4% of the children had special needs. One possible explanation is that most of families have a nurse or nanny taking care solely for children with special needs, easing the stress and burden on the family, which is commonly the main reason for child abuse. Another possibility is that amongst children with special needs who are staying in chronic care facility, underreporting of child abuse is more likely.

In Al Ain, 40% of abused children were below 2 years old, 44% were aged between 2 and 12 years old and rest 15% were above the age of 12 years. This is nearly similar to data described in Bahrain where children 6 - 12 years were the main victims of physical abuse followed by children under 3 years, diminishing with increasing age. This is compatible with the observation in most international studies in which younger children are at more risk of all forms of CAN [7]. This means that increasing the awareness of parents and any adult treating or dealing with this age group will equate to protecting 80% of at risk children.

In Bahrain, there was an increase in the number of reported child physical abuse cases over a period of 10 years. This may reflect either a genuine rise in the incidence of child physical abuse or an improvement in the recognition and referral of cases by professionals [7]. Unfortunately our study showed a decreased incidence of reporting over the years from 2013 to 2015. Despite the increased awareness of both the community and the medical staff of this issue, further efforts are clearly still needed. Similarly to Bahrain where better reporting

attributed to better communication between professionals from different sectors and disciplines with the existence of intervention guidelines and the establishment in May 2007 of the Child Protection Centre [7], we are hoping that the implementation of the new “Wadeema’s law” in the UAE will improve recognition and increase awareness about child protection.

Limitations of the study include the fact that, as we only studied the children seeking medical attention in two main hospitals in Al Ain city, the true magnitude of child maltreatment in the city is probably underestimated. Also as UAE government just now aiming to include children aging from 16-18 in pediatric department, but at the time of the study the age of children included in pediatric in the 2 hospitals were till the age of 15 years.

### Conclusion

Child abuse and neglect do exist in UAE. In order to estimate the exact prevalence in the country, further national studies are needed. Currently, the low number of reported cases is attributed to the deficiency in the reporting mechanism of any suspected case of child abuse by the treating physicians. This can be explained by the under training of physician in child protection or the hesitance to report these cases and follow the hospital policy. Further studies are required to explain the reasons for underreporting. In the meantime, further training of all clinical staff dealing with children in child protection and abuse reporting should be intensified.

### Acknowledgements

The authors thank Professor Hassib Narchi, at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, UAE University, for his support with this article

### Conflict of Interest

The authors confirm the absence of any potential conflict of interest or funding.

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**Volume 6 Issue 2 October 2017**

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