Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

What's in a Name? Sentinel Injuries in Abused Infants

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Infants are at greatest risk of severe and fatal physical abuse yet they sometimes present for medical care multiple times with abusive injuries prior to being diagnosed with abuse and having protective actions taken. Efforts to identify these infants in a timely manner are critical to prevent repeated, escalating abuse and subsequent harm. Increasing the identification and evaluation of sentinel injuries has been highlighted as a strategy for improving timely detection of abuse in infants. Sentinel injuries are visible, minor, poorly explained injuries in young infants that raise concern for abuse. These injuries include cutaneous injuries such as bruising, subconjunctival hemorrhages and intra-oral injuries. Sentinel injuries can signal concurrent clinically occult but more serious injuries or precede more significant trauma from abuse. As such, sentinel injuries offer an opportunity to intervene and protect infants from further harm. A thorough physical exam is critical for detecting sentinel injuries. Imaging with skeletal survey and, when appropriate, neuroimaging are key components of the medical evaluation of sentinel injuries in these high-risk infants.

Journal:

Pediatric Radiology
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  Mar 2020