

ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse is a significant public health problem. Health care and social welfare professionals play a crucial role in the care and protection of children who have been abused. However several factors influence the professionals knowledge, attitude and practice in their attempts to carry out their duty. The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of personal experiences of childhood, training and job experiences and demographic factors on the knowledge, attitude and practice of professionals who investigate cases of child sexual abuse. It consisted of a cross-sectional comparative study, designed to describe and to compare three groups of professionals within the Corporate Area of Kingston and St. Andrew who are attached to public institutions that offer immediate and long-term services to sexually abused children.

The results showed that there were significant relationships between personal experiences of childhood, training and job experience and the knowledge level of the professionals. The professionals who were victims of childhood sexual abuse themselves demonstrated superior behavior in all three parameters of knowledge, attitude and practice. Furthermore, those who acknowledged these experiences had superior scores compared to those who minimized their experiences. Although the medical doctors demonstrated superior knowledge scores the social workers had better attitude scores and the police officers the best practice scores.

The high prevalence (68%) of childhood sexual abuse among this group of professionals further supports the social importance of this problem.. These findings are interesting as they represent a positive outcome from an extremely negative situation. It allows public health authorities an opportunity to develop and implement services that not only attempt to treat acute situations but recognize and promote optimum health in care-givers.

This study sheds light on the need for an integrated approach encompassing not only knowledge but also attitude and practice in the training of health care and social welfare professionals. It can be concluded also that further interaction among the various groups of professionals should have a positive influence on behavior.