

(Continued)

"There are many, many, many Ryan Luke cases," Dr. Stemke said.

Dr. Stemke said cases of physical abuse differed greatly from those of sexual abuse. Child abuse investigators appear "to work overtime to show that a case is not child abuse," while those involved in the investigation of alleged sexual abuse "over-respond," Dr. Stemke said.

"Some children are often placed in harms way," Dr. Stemke said, "because of this under-reaction" in child abuse cases.

Part of the problem, Dr. Stemke said, was the reluctance of many involved in the investigation of abuse allegations to assign blame to the child's caretakers.

Asked by Rep. Laura Boyd what legislators could do to distinguish between parental discipline and physical abuse, Dr. Stemke explained that it was the opinion of many in the medical profession that if injuries, such as broken bones, result from the striking of a child, then it should be considered child abuse.

Dr. Stemke, who chairs the hospital's Child Protection Committee, estimated that some 1,400 cases of suspected child abuse pass through his hospital each year, resulting in an average of one death per month.

Dr. Stemke also said that he and other physicians are working with the medical examiner's office to improve reporting procedures in cases involving child deaths. Specifically, Dr. Stemke said, autopsy reports often fail to note the presence of certain injuries which may or may not have contributed to the child's death, but may be signs of abuse.

For example, Dr. Stemke said, a child may show no outward signs of injury and may be believed to have died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, but the autopsy reveals other serious injuries which the medical examiner may not be able to say were the cause of death.

"We would like the medical examiner to say in those cases that he could not determine the cause of death and that there were signs of physical abuse," Dr. Stemke said.

That, Dr. Stemke said, would mean law enforcement and other agencies would not automatically close their investigations into the child's death.

"If they see the medical examiner believes the death was from natural causes or SIDS, they're going to close the books," he said. "This way, they should continue their investigation."

Dr. Stemke also urged the lawmakers to find ways to get agencies that have contact with families with children to share information.

"It has amazed us that in some cases we've had that it was the first time child welfare had been made aware of the problem, while the police may have gone to the home five times for domestic problems," Dr. Stemke explained. "That means you have a situation known by one part of the system, but not by another."

By sharing information between agencies, Dr. Stemke said, the agencies might be better able to reduce instances of child abuse.

Similarly, Dr. Stemke told the panel, the confidentiality laws surrounding child abuse investigations should be examined.

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