

Maternity services: Dealing with coercive relationships and forced marriage

The issue of forced marriage is intimately linked to violence against women and is one that clinicians should be aware of in the UK and abroad.

Healthcare professionals need to bear in mind that asking the 'difficult question' may be the most effective way to determine whether a patient's relationship with their partner/guardian/relative is coercive or dangerous. This includes questions relating to patient circumstances i.e. domestic and/or substance abuse.

Identifying factors to look out for during consultations include patients who:

- are quiet/timid or display submissive behaviour
- are young in age but have a previous history of multiple pregnancies
- are always accompanied to appointments
- have a controlling partner or carer
- require translations due to cultural/language barriers

The role of the healthcare professional is to ensure that booking history is comprehensive and to observe interactions between the patient and partner/carers.

In order to maintain good record-keeping on patient safety, clinicians should ensure:

- next of kin and partner details are recorded
- living situation details (i.e. with parents/partner) are recorded
- concerns are recorded in confidential notes accessible to other healthcare professionals but not directly to family members
- safeguarding teams within maternity unit are informed and involved
- all identified injuries are recorded
- concerns are shared with appropriate professionals e.g. the patient's GP

Healthcare professionals need to recognise the importance of the 'one chance rule'. For many women and young girls, interaction with a health worker during pregnancy is the only social interaction they may have outside of a coercive relationship, within a marriage or their family.

If there is one chance to ask difficult questions and ensure the safety of the patient, it should be taken but done so in a safe and sensitive manner.

It is important for healthcare professionals to follow-up by making contact with the appropriate agencies that can provide counselling, advocacy and have the power to ultimately ensure the woman's wellbeing.

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Freedom Charity have developed a free iPhone App offering help, assistance and instruction to vulnerable women and healthcare professionals – [access now](#)