



# What is This Red Mark?

Kathleen A. Shanel-Hogan, DDS, MA



Kathleen A. Shanel-Hogan, DDS, MA, will present "Dental Professionals Against Violence" during CDA's Spring Scientific Session in Anaheim, Calif. The presentation will be held from 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Friday, April 16 in Huntington Rooms A/B/C at the Hilton. A repeat presentation is from 2:30 to 5 p.m.

**T**he three-year-old child waits for you in your operatory. As you begin the dental examination, you observe a reddening of the soft palate.

Do you note it, look past it, and continue with the exam? Most caring and unaware dentists unconsciously do. I was one of those dentists until 1994 when I first saw this photograph of a child of sexual abuse from forced oral sex (Figure 1). So, what is your next step?

*You review some differential diagnosis possibilities.*

- Normal variations in oral mucosa?
- Sore throat?
- Oral cancer lesions?
- Trauma?

You review the child's health history. Is discussing it with the parent accompanying the child a good idea? Perhaps you might begin with an open-ended question to the parent, i.e. "I am noticing a red mark on the roof of the child's mouth. Can you help me understand more about this?" Listen closely to the history the parent provides. Does it correlate with the mark present? Is the explanation correlate to the child's age and development?

■ Is there notation in the chart of this type of observation of the child on previous visits?

■ Has the child experienced a cold or sore throat lately?

■ Has the child complained of a sore throat, had difficulty swallowing, or refused to eat?

■ Has there been any trauma or accident in the child's mouth lately, i.e. falling with a candy pop or toy in the mouth?

Maybe this is normal mucosa. Maybe there is another possible diagnosis. It may be an indication of sexual abuse with forced oral sex.

Child sexual abuse is often a silent crime with the victim being told the relationship is special or secret. Maybe the perpetrator threatens to harm others, i.e. parents, the child, pets. Unless the child shares their experience with another, evidence of the crime may only be observed physically in the genital-anal area or the oral cavity of the child. The child's head and neck are the areas of examination of the dental professional. The average age of a physically abused child is 3 years old. With the initial dental examination now being advocated at age 1, imagine how many potentially abused children can be recognized and assisted through the efforts of dentists and physicians before the

child can voice their situation and pain.

Sharing your concerns for the child with the parent may be exactly what the parent or guardian needs. They also may have concerns and/or appreciate your completeness. You have the option of telling the parent that it is your legal obligation to contact a child protective services agency and file a mandated report. If you have concern for the child's immediate safety, call 911 and report it to law enforcement. If sharing with the adult concerns you for your own safety or your staff's safety, you can call Child Protective Services or 911 without telling the parent or accompanying adult.

Dentists, registered dental hygienists, and registered dental assistants are mandated reporters in California. We are not investigators or accusers. We are the legally bound observers that assist agencies that are qualified to investigate and obtain assistance for the child and family. We can make a positive difference for our patients and their families.

I never did find out what happened to the 3-year-old child in this scenario,



**Author** / Kathleen A. Shanel-Hogan, DDS, MA, is a consultant, educator, facilitator and family violence prevention advocate. She works with the California Dental Association Foundation as a consultant and a mandated reporter trainer in all forms of family violence (child abuse/neglect, domestic violence, elder abuse/neglect). She is author of the Dental Professionals Against Violence Program, and testified on behalf of dentistry at the California Assembly Select Committee On Domestic Violence Hearing "Domestic Violence As A Public Health Issue." She participates on many California statewide committees on family violence prevention. Dr. Shanel-Hogan has experience in private practice and hospital dentistry with medically compromised patients.



Figure 1. Bruised soft palate from forced oral sex. Photo courtesy of Lynn Mouden, DDS, MPH.

but the impact in my life since seeing the photograph has been profound. My observation skills are expanded and enhanced. I am actively working toward informing our dental community regarding family violence prevention. Please join with me and the Dental Professionals Against Violence at the California Dental Association Foundation at (800) 736-8702, ext. 8900. For more information mandated reporting and the law refer to California Department of Justice Crime and Violence Prevention Center's Web site, [www.safestate.ca.gov](http://www.safestate.ca.gov). **CDA**

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