

Statement of Bonnie Hill, Survivor of Domestic Violence
Health Cares About Violence Against Women Day, October 7, 2008

My name is Bonnie Hill. I grew up in central Iowa on a family farm that was loving and peaceful. My husband and I attended the same high school and junior college.

My ex-husband started out very charming, yet controlling. He became verbally, emotional, financially, sexually and physically abusive. It escalated as the years went on. This was domestic abuse grown old.

Because my husband is a pastor, the first place I went for help was the bishop. He told me I was overreacting. So I never got any help. Then I ended up with health issues.

Over the years, I had many encounters with the health care system.

The first doctor I remember seeing was for shortness of breath and chest pain. I thought I was having a heart attack. They did all the heart tests and then sent me across the hall to a psychiatrist who prescribed drugs. This greatly increased my stress, but it made my abuser very happy; you see he had been telling me for years if I would just get my head screwed on straight we would not have any problems..... All that the first psychiatrist was interested in was how our sex life was. He never asked if I had the right to say "no." Or how life in general was at home.

I saw a doctor in urgent care when I was in so much pain I could barely walk. I had bruises on my arms and chest. The nurse asked how I got them and I told her my husband did that, and her response was "I hope it does not happen often." When I told her it happens all the time she never followed up or documented my chart. The doctor never mentioned the bruises.

I spent two months in a psychiatric hospital, a month without any treatment plan..... The good news from this experience was that this gave me two months away from the verbal and mental abuse. I started to heal and regain some of my self esteem.

Part of my recovery plan was to follow up with my primary doctor. She was very caring, and after that, when I came in she always asked how things were going. At one point she was so concerned about what was happening in my home that she sent me for HIV testing. Having her ask and care made a huge difference to me. I knew someone else was aware of what was happening to me.

Once, when I asked an emergency room doctor if the chest pain could be from stress, she said that stress was a deep dark hole but she never asked why I might have been that stressed.

I wish she had asked me what was happening to me that was so stressful to cause chest pain. I wish she would have asked if I was safe at home, if anyone was yelling at me, pushing me around... I wish they had asked me to tell them about a typical day in my home.....

I needed to hear that what I was living was not right. I needed to hear that abuse could be affecting my health. I needed to know where to go, whom to talk to, so I could understand what I was experiencing in my own home, that I was being abused, there were places for me to get

help, for people to believe me. The clergy I talked to told me I was over reacting and they needed to see the bruises or broken bones and did not believe I was being abused. I desperately needed the medical profession to recognize the trauma in my life.

I saw my health care providers every year for annual check-ups. It is critical that health care professionals – medical, dental, chiropractors and other health care professionals – screen for abuse.

They can plant the seed that abuse is wrong. They screen me for drugs, alcohol and smoking, which lets me know they are destructive to my health. So why not abuse?

I became involved with the WCADV and learned about abuse and spent several years volunteering for the University of Wisconsin Medical School as a domestic abuse standardized patient teaching medical students how to ask and screen for abuse.