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Diagnosing abuse: a systematic review of torn frenum and other intra-oral injuries

Sabine Maguire, Bruce Hunter, Lindsay Hunter, Jo Richard Sibert, Mala Mann, Alison Mary Kemp, for the Welsh Child Protection Systematic Review Group

Introduction: A torn labial frenum is widely regarded as pathognomonic of abuse.

Methods: We systematically reviewed the evidence for this, and to define other intra-oral injuries found in physical abuse. Nine studies documented abusive torn labial frenum in 30 children and 27 were fatally abused: 22 were less than 5 years old. Only a direct blow to the face was substantiated as a mechanism of injury.

Results: Two studies noted accidentally torn labial frenum, both from intubation. Abusive intra-oral injuries were widely distributed to the lips, gums, tongue and palate and included fractures, intrusion and extraction of the dentition, bites and contusions.

Conclusions: Current literature does not support the diagnosis of abuse based on a torn labial frenum in isolation. The intra-oral hard and soft tissue should be examined in all suspected abuse cases, and a dental opinion sought where abnormalities are found.

Facial and intra-oral trauma has been described in up to 49% of infants and 38% of toddlers who have been physically abused. A torn labial frenum (often referred to as frenulum or phrenum) is widely believed by paediatricians to be pathognomonic of abuse, and has been described as the most common abusive injury to the mouth. Several abusive mechanisms have been proposed and include forced feeding, gagging, gripping and violent rubbing of, or a direct blow to, the upper lip. A torn labial frenum, however, is regarded as a trivial intra-oral injury by dental practitioners, as it is likely to heal spontaneously with minimal complications, and is not reported in large-scale dental trauma surveys.

It is estimated that up to 50% of all school-age children sustain accidental dental injuries, challenging clinicians to distinguish between abusive and non-abusive injuries to the mouth.

We systematically reviewed the literature to establish the probability of a torn labial frenum being caused by physical child abuse and to define what other intra-oral injuries are found in physical abuse.

METHODS

Data sources and participants

We carried out an all-language literature search of research articles, conference abstracts, websites and references in all articles identified, including review articles and relevant textbooks from 1950 to June 2006. The key words and details of databases searched can be found in tables 1 and 2, respectively. Articles were scanned for duplication and relevance. Authors were contacted where necessary. The resulting studies were reviewed by members of the Welsh Child Protection Systematic Review Group, a panel of 31 people who were paediatricians, child health professionals with child protection expertise, or paediatric or forensic dentists. Each study was subjected to two independent reviews and a third if disputed. Standardised criteria for study definition, data extraction and critical appraisal were used. Full critical appraisal and data extraction forms are available at http://www.core-info.cf.ac.uk.

Data extraction

We included all studies of children aged 0–18 years with intra-oral injuries due to physical child abuse, and torn labial frenum of any aetiology, in live and fatal cases. We defined intra-oral as the area between the vermilion border of the lips and the hypopharynx.

We excluded review articles, expert opinion or guidelines that did not include primary evidence, studies with mixed adult and child data where the children's data could not be extracted, studies that addressed complications or management of abusive injuries, intra-oral injuries due to sexual abuse, or thermal injuries (as these will be encompassed in separate reviews) or dental neglect.

Studies were ranked by study design and by the likelihood that abuse had taken place in the “abused” population. We used our own ranking of abuse, as previously described, where a ranking of 1 gave the highest security of diagnosis that abuse had taken place, and a ranking of 5 the least confidence (table 3). We included studies with a ranking of 1–4. In the case of non-abusive injuries, we only included studies where authors had described methods to ensure that abuse had been excluded.

RESULTS

Of 154 studies reviewed, 19 met the inclusion criteria. These represented data on 591 children. There were no comparative cross-sectional or case-control studies of torn labial frenum to enable a probability of abuse to be determined for this injury. The only mechanism described for an abusive torn frenum was a direct blow to the face, recorded in two children. No details of mechanisms were given in other cases. Likewise, there were no comparative studies to compare the characteristics of other abusive and non-abusive intra-oral injuries.

Abusive torn labial frenum

Nine studies documented torn labial frenum in abused children (table 4): seven were case series or case studies and one was a case-control study. None of these studies were designed to address torn frenum specifically; the case-control evaluated blunt abdominal trauma in association with cardio-pulmonary resuscitation.

These studies represented data on 30 children, of whom 27 (90%) were fatally abused. Twenty two were 5 years of age or
frenum was struck about the face. Two of the three children were fatally abused with associated head injuries; multiple bruises and fractures were found in all three.

Of the remaining 11 reported cases, nine were fatally abused with associated head injury\textsuperscript{14, 21–23} (personal correspondence with authors), five had fatal abdominal injuries and one had co-existent ano-genital sexual abuse with multiple fractures.\textsuperscript{16} The remaining two had other intra-oral injuries, and one later sustained an intracranial injury.\textsuperscript{17–20}

**Non-abusive torn labial frenum**

Two separate case studies documented a torn upper labial frenum occurring as a consequence of an intubation, both in fatally injured children.\textsuperscript{22–23} No further details were offered. When contacted, the authors of the larger series of dental trauma in children\textsuperscript{16} replied that they did not record a torn frenum as they regarded this as a trivial dental injury.

**Abusive intra-oral injuries**

Fourteen studies documented other types of abusive intra-oral injuries.\textsuperscript{3, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 22–23} They were all case series or studies, and 11/14 had a higher abuse ranking of 1 or 2. They represented data on 579 children (table 5). The most commonly recorded abusive injuries to the mouth were lacerations or bruising to the lips. The remaining injuries included mucosal lacerations, dental trauma (including fractures, intrusion and forced extraction), tongue injuries and gingival lesions. No characteristics of these lesions were specific to an abusive aetiology, apart from an adult bite to a child’s tongue.\textsuperscript{19}

Becker recorded orofacial trauma in 49% of 260 abused children, 14 (6%) of whom had intra-oral injuries.\textsuperscript{3} The largest series, by Naidoo, showed that 59% of 300 physically abused

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**Table 1** Keywords and phrases used for the electronic search

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword/phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>avulsion inj.:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intraoral adj3 burn:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intradental adj3 lesion:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lip scars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lip or lips.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scars adj3 lip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vermilion border.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tongue mp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>floor of mouth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luxation injury or luxated tooth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lateral luxation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>displaced tooth or intruded tooth or extruded tooth or avulsed tooth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intrusion injury or extrusion injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subluxated tooth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crown fract: or root fract:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crown adj3 fracture: or root adj3 fracture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alveolar injury or alveolar fracture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dental traumatology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oral traumatology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>periodontal injury or gingival injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gingivae or gingival laceration:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gingival contusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gingival tear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gingival bruise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>torn frenum or frenum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>torn frenum or frenum or frenulum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alveol:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avulsed teeth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2** Databases used for the search strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASSIA 1987–June 2006</td>
<td>ASSIA: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts on the Web is an indexing and abstracting tool covering health, social services, economics, politics, race relations and education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CareData 1980–June 2006</td>
<td>Social work and social care knowledge base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CINAHL 1982–June 2006</td>
<td>The Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL) database provides authoritative coverage of the literature related to nursing and allied health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMBASE 1980–June 2006</td>
<td>The EMBASE family consists of three separate databases: (1) EMBASE: Excerpta Medica Database, and its subsets, (2) EMBASE Drugs and Pharmacology, and (3) EMBASE Psychiatry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDLINE 1950–June 2006</td>
<td>Biomedicine, allied health, biological and physical sciences, humanities and information science as they relate to medicine and health care, communication disorders, population biology and reproductive biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ovid MEDLINE June 2006</td>
<td>System for Information on Grey Literature in Europe is a bibliographic database covering European non-conventional (so-called grey) literature in the fields of pure and applied natural sciences and technology, economics, social sciences and humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGLE 1980–June 2006</td>
<td>In-process and other non-indexed citations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIP Database 1997–June 2006</td>
<td>The TRIP Database searches over 55 sites of high-quality medical information. It gives direct, hyperlinked access to the largest collection of “evidence-based” material on the web as well as articles from premier on-line journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sciences Citation Index 1981–June 2006</td>
<td>Sciences Citation Index is a multidisciplinary database, covering the journal literature of the social sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISI Proceedings 1990–June 2006</td>
<td>Covers conference papers in all scientific and technical fields</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
children had facial injuries, 11% of whom had intra-oral injuries. The most common injuries recorded were to the lips (22 children). There were also seven fractured mandibles, and six injuries to oral mucosa, five to teeth, five to gingiva and three to the tongue. Torn frena were not recorded specifically. The children were selected from those with known physical abuse and orofacial injury. No child was examined by a dentist in any of these studies, and the data were collected retrospectively from chart reviews, raising the question of how often the mouth was actually examined.

Injuries to the tongue included an adult bite to an infant’s tongue in a 10-month-old child, with the arc of the bite pointing towards the lips, confirming it could not have been self inflicted, with multiple fractures, bruises and subdural haemorrhages and abrasions and bruising.

In three studies oral bleeding was a presenting symptom. In one case the infant re-presented five times from the age of 4 months, and was found to have a laceration of the uvula with several abrasions and lacerations of the upper gum, tongu.

 hyperspasm and fractures.

The most frequently reported abusive injury to the mouth is a torn labial frenum. There is a paucity of published scientific literature about the torn labial frenum. There are no studies defining the incidence of torn labial frena in abuse and none that compare the injury in abused and non-abused children. It is impossible, therefore, to ascertain a probability of abuse for a torn labial frenum. Published studies are limited to 30 highly selected cases where a torn labial frenum is described in predominantly pre-school children who had suffered serious abuse, and where the majority of cases were fatal with extensive associated injuries. The only substantiated cause of an abusive torn labial frenum was a direct blow. There were no recorded cases of forced feeding, twisting or rubbing causing this injury. The literature includes mention of torn labial frenum that were not abusive, and therefore a torn frenum in isolation cannot be described as pathognomonic of physical abuse. Clearly the finding of an unexplained torn labial frenum in a young child warrants full investigation, but the paucity of data in the literature and the highly selected nature of cases reported precludes defining an age band where concern would be highest. A diagnosis of physical abuse should not be based on a single injury in isolation, but arrived at in the context of the child’s medical, social and developmental history and the explanation offered for the injury.

Some of the largest series in the literature were not eligible for inclusion as they were only ranked 5 for abuse. They included cases of suspected abuse, with no separation of data on those cases where abuse was actually confirmed.

It is important when assessing a possible torn labial frenum to consider rarer congenital abnormalities of the labial frenum such as midline diastema, hypertrophic frenum in association with hypoplastic left heart syndrome, and multiple frenum in other congenital heart syndromes such as Ellis-van Creveld or Pallister-Hall as possible explanations of the abnormality.

The most frequently reported abusive injury to the mouth is not a torn labial frenum, as has been suggested, but injury to the lips. This assumes that the mouths of all abused children in the various series were fully examined. As these were retrospective studies of case notes, this is far from clear. None of the described abusive intra-oral injuries had any diagnostic characteristics, except for a bitten tongue.

It is important that paediatricians are aware of the appropriate primary and secondary dentition expected at a given age, in order to question the absence of permanent teeth, as described by Cotton. Many of the intra-oral injuries described in abused children are likely to be seen by general dental practitioners, yet dentists make very few child protection referrals. This is highlighted by Cotton, who noted that of 20 000 child abuse investigations only 12 were initiated by dentists. A survey by Becker et al. of 1332 dentists in the USA, where there was mandatory reporting with a response rate of 40%, noted that 22 cases of child abuse were seen but only four (18%) were referred to social services.

### Table 4  Studies of abusive torn frenum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/year</th>
<th>Abuse ranking (1–5)</th>
<th>Number of children (ages)</th>
<th>Co-existing injuries</th>
<th>Fatal/live</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cameron et al, 1966</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13 approx (0–4.5 years)</td>
<td>Some tearing of the upper lip, near the frenum</td>
<td>All fatal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tate, 1971</td>
<td>1, 4</td>
<td>3 (23 months–4 years)</td>
<td>With/without intracranial injury</td>
<td>1 live, 2 fatal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace and Grace, 1977</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (18 months)</td>
<td>Later re-admitted – multiple fractures, intracranial injury, hypertrophic puncture</td>
<td>Live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symons et al, 1987</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 (3 years)</td>
<td>Contusion of eye/subdural haemorrhage, multiple bruises</td>
<td>Fatal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manning et al, 1990</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 (4 months)</td>
<td>Lacerations to uvula, upper gum, hard palate, floor of mouth.</td>
<td>Fatal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbs and Wynne, 1990</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (0.4 years)</td>
<td>Multiple bruises, sexual abuse, fractures and retinal haemorrhages, developmental delay</td>
<td>Fatal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price et al, 2000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5 (0–10 years)</td>
<td>Extensive abdominal injuries, other injuries not detailed in these cases</td>
<td>All fatal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cordner et al, 2001</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (18 months)</td>
<td>Occipital skull fracture, intracranial haemorrhage, widespread bruising</td>
<td>Fatal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillips and van der Heyde, 2006</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 (5 years)</td>
<td>Tranquil bruising to legs, also bruising to eyes, ear and scalp.</td>
<td>Fatal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
despite a legal requirement to report suspected abuse. A similar study by Malecz³⁴ showed that not only did few dentists report abuse cases, but 7% of 155 respondents said that under no circumstances would they report child abuse. Reasons cited included uncertainty about diagnosis and fear of litigation, although practitioners making a referral “in good faith” are protected from litigation. Even 12 years later, a survey of 250 dentists, 157 of whom responded, showed that 50% of dentists had suspected abuse but one third did not refer the case,⁴² and similar reluctance has recently been documented in the UK where 21% of dentists did not refer cases they suspected of having been abused.⁴³ There have been a number of initiatives in the United States to tackle this issue,⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ and Welbury et al have developed a computer-assisted learning programme for general dental practitioners in the United Kingdom,⁴⁶ and the British Dental Council have recently published guidance.⁴⁷

There is no legal mandatory reporting of child abuse in the UK, but the British Dental Association has made it clear that dentists do have an ethical responsibility to report child abuse.⁴⁸ Clearly, those responsible for child protection training in each region must include dental practitioners and hygienists in such programmes, and offer ongoing support.

As in previous reviews,¹ ² ⁴ children with disability were not represented. This is particularly disappointing as disabled children are recorded as being three times more likely to be abused than their able-bodied counterparts.⁵⁰

Whilst this review did not deal with dental neglect, a notable number of cases presented co-existing neglect with resulting dental caries, likely to cause severe pain to the child.²³ ²⁴ Dental neglect while variably defined,⁵⁴ should be considered in any child with extensive dental caries or early childhood caries where appropriate dental care has not been sought.⁵¹ ⁵² This subject merits a review in its own right, in view of the potential implications in relation to pain, morbidity and faltering growth.²⁵

Future research should be directed at determining the sensitivity and specificity of intra-oral injuries in abuse by well-designed comparative studies. It is clear that we need to define those children who sustain accidental torn frenum, in isolation or otherwise, by age, developmental stage and co-existent injury and cause, in order to aid the distinction from abusive torn frenum. Attention should be given specifically to documenting the full extent of intra-oral injuries in physically abused children and their co-existent injuries, and this should include disabled children.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**
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**Competing interests:** None.

**REFERENCES**
Intra-oral injuries

Table 1 Single values and mean nNO levels of patients with PCD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>T0 ppb</th>
<th>T1 ppb</th>
<th>T2 ppb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case 1</td>
<td>9.2; 6.5; 6.0 mean 7.2</td>
<td>10; 8.0 mean 8.0</td>
<td>6.0; 10; 10 mean 8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 2</td>
<td>38; 42; 43 mean 41</td>
<td>43; 35; 37 mean 38.3</td>
<td>25; 40; 25 mean 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Case 1: T0 at 5 days of life, T1 at 30 days without clinical symptoms and finally T2 at 60 days of life.
Case 2: T0 first test, T1 after 60 days and T2 after 90 days.

Therefore, the levels of nNO in the elder brother and parents were evaluated. The nNO levels were normal in both parents. By contrast, in the 7-year-old child the mean nNO levels’ current state of the art. Arch Dis Child 2007; 92:1136–40.


Prevalence of anaemia in an inner city primary school population

Iron deficiency, defined as a serum ferritin level of <15 μg/l,1 has been shown to adversely affect many aspects of health and development in childhood and persistence into school age may result in sub-optimal health and academic under-achievement. National research has demonstrated that a high prevalence of anaemia in pre-school children (12%), causally linked to iron deficiency related to dietary factors, is common in areas of socioeconomic deprivation1 and particularly in children of minority ethnic parentage, especially of Pakistani origin.2 There is little information in the literature about the prevalence of anaemia in school aged populations, so trained operators using a HaemoCue (HaemoCue, Angelholm, Sweden) machine3 tested a whole school sample in an inner city area with a high percentage of children of Pakistani parentage.

A total of 319 children aged 4–11 years were tested, representing a uptake rate of 90%: 88% of these children were of Pakistani origin. Anaemia was found in 25% (95% CI 20% to 30%) of the children. 22% (95% CI 18% to 27%) were mildly anaemic and 3% (95% CI 1% to 5%) were severely anaemic. We used the standard WHO reference2 for defining severe anaemia as a haemoglobin level below 9.0 g/dl for those under 5 years of age and below 9.5 g/dl for those 5 years of age and over. Mild anaemia was defined as a haemoglobin level between 9.0 and 10.9 g/dl for those under 5 and between 9.5 and 11.4 g/dl for those aged 5 and over. No significant trend across school years was found.

Parents or carers of the mildly anaemic children were offered dietary advice and follow-up by the community nursing team. The eight children who were severely anaemic were assessed by a community paediatrician and appropriate treatment and follow-up were arranged. Full blood count, serum electrophoresis and serum ferritin levels were carried out and confirmed iron deficiency in all eight cases. One child was found to have the thalassaemia trait in addition to iron deficiency.

We have demonstrated that anaemia is a significant health problem in this school aged population, most likely caused by iron deficiency. We are now carrying out similar studies in other local areas of different ethnicity and social constitution to ascertain whether this is a more general problem. It may be that the problem is related as much to the modern western diet of a school age child as to the continuing effects of traditional weaning and early childhood diets that have been implicated in this population. It will also be important to ascertain the extent of any problem in the adolescent age group.

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Children’s Services, Derby City PCT, Derby, UK
Correspondence to: E A Adamson, Children’s Services, Derby City PCT, Widerlowe, 121 Osmaston Road, Derby DE1 2GA, UK; Liz.Adamson@derbycitypct.nhs.uk
Competing interests: None.
Arch Dis Child 2008; 93:453. doi:10.1136/adc.2007.116301

REFERENCES

CORRECTION
doi:10.1136/adc.2006.113001corr1


A number of errors were published in this paper as follows:

In the methods section of the Abstract the second sentence should read: “Nine studies documented abusive torn labial frena in 27 children and 24 were fatally abused...” The second sentence of the Results section should read: “These represented data on 603 children.” Also in the Results section, under the subheading “Abusive torn labial frenum”, first sentence of the second paragraph should read: “These studies represented data on 27 children, of whom 24 (88%) were fatally abused...” Under the heading “Abusive intra-oral injuries” on p1114 the third sentence of the first paragraph should read: “They represented data on 580 children (table 5).”
Diagnosing abuse: a systematic review of torn frenum and other intra-oral injuries

Sabine Maguire, Bruce Hunter, Lindsay Hunter, et al.

Arch Dis Child 2007 92: 1113-1117 originally published online April 27, 2007
doi: 10.1136/adc.2006.113001

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://adc.bmj.com/content/92/12/1113.full.html

These include:

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