

# Human Trafficking: Recognizing and reacting – the Role of the Dental Professional

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## Abstract

Human trafficking (HT) is a pervasive and escalating global crisis affecting communities across North America, with victims commonly aged between 13 and 16 years. Increasingly facilitated through online platforms and organized criminal networks, trafficking often involves coercion, violence, psychological manipulation, and forced drug dependency. Victims frequently remain invisible within healthcare settings due to fear, mistrust of law enforcement, psychological control, and threats against themselves or their families. Dental professionals are uniquely positioned to identify potential victims, as trafficked individuals may access dental care while under the supervision of a controlling perpetrator. This article outlines key clinical and behavioral indicators of trafficking observable in dental settings, including signs of physical abuse, branding tattoos, malnourishment, substance misuse, anxiety, memory loss, and the presence of a domineering companion. It also discusses the challenges of differentiating trafficking from domestic violence or other forms of abuse. Emphasis is placed on the importance of observation, compassion, trust-building, and creating a safe clinical environment. Practical guidance is provided regarding appropriate questioning, documentation, and referral pathways, including hotline resources in Canada and the United States. Through education and heightened awareness, dental professionals can play a critical role in recognizing, responding to, and supporting victims of human trafficking.

**Keywords:** Human Trafficking, Dental professionals, Oral healthcare providers, Forensic dentistry.

## Introduction

### Human Trafficking

1. HT effects every community in Canada.
2. Sex traffickers are master manipulators. The average age is 10 yrs old when a child gets a device (cell phone or iPad). Online HT predators are there. It takes 18 minutes to meet a new online friend. The USA Cyber-Tip hotline receives 32 million calls per year, many of the calls involve missing children.
3. There used to be red-light districts with street prostitutes, but now there is online apps and the “dark web”, where men can meet-up women/girls and pay for sex in hotels and motels.
4. There is organized crime. The CCP, Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese government, is the largest criminal organization in the world. In our North American continent, they work with Mexican Cartels. Sadly, Canada is the

“playground for organized crime” as the RCMP is not properly equipped and funded.

Poly-criminalization occurs i.e. they do drug trafficking (fentanyl), money laundering (often through real estate investments), and sex trafficking. It favors this diversification of criminal activity, in order to finance each criminal activity if needed. Unfortunately, police corruption in Canada has occurred, and continues to occur. The police are “paid-odd”, they are bribed, by transnational organized crime. Human trafficking victims, as a result, are too often afraid to ask police for help, and seek help from social workers. When police rescue sex trafficking victims, it is by being arrested for drug dealing and prostitution. Not a direct rescue, but indirectly.

One of my staff, and colleague, a hygienist, was almost kidnapped at a local shopping mall. This also happened to one of

my dental patients, she was almost kidnapped at a shopping mall parking lot. You need to be aware of your surroundings at all times; don't be with head down in your cell phone while walking to your car in a parking lot! The answer? The solution to these risks and dangers? Do not be a cellphone zombie, with your head down. Instead, BE Alert! Look around. Be Aware of your environment. Keep your eyes moving. Leave yourself an out, to backtrack, to evade danger.

The average age of HT victims is 13 to 16. This is the average from a statistics BELL CURVE. So, there can be younger and older adult victims on the curves of the Bell Curve. Some women, aged 40, have a "baby face", and hence they look like aged 20.

People are victimized into trafficking via runaways from home (maybe sometimes running away from abusive family situation), or homeless people kidnapped, or just simply kidnapped in broad daylight. Some are imported from foreign countries, promised a better life as a nanny or a waitress, and to be loved; and instead, are forced into sex trafficking. These sex trafficking are often then drugged with narcotics or other hard drugs, to be introduced into sex with multiple men per day; a normal sober woman would not normally participate willingly. They are often violently raped first, before being put into prostitution. Many become drug addicts and/or drug dealers, as forced to by the "perp".

Regarding looking for rescue opportunities, most do not even realize that they are being trafficked. And if they are seeking to be rescued, they do not trust the police. Quite often, in our dental office, it's often more important to let them know that the office is a safe place to come to in the future if they need rescue help or comfort. It's not always initially about rescue, unless they specifically ask. Let them know that this is a safe place to call or visit again. Also, dentists and hygienist and front desk staff need the power of observation, and tremendous emphasis on kindness and compassion to these victims. Offer to get them their favorite "take-out" food at their next dental appointment, building their trust.

The biggest red flag is the domineering older man or woman that accompanies the victim to the dental appointment. Other red flags:

1. Appears malnourished, lice; iv drug marks on arms, legs.
2. Sign of abuse: bruising, bitemarks, (sometimes the dilemma is it is difficult to distinguish HT versus domestic violence victim when there are only these abuse signs.
3. Branding: tattoos or necklace with gang symbol.
4. Fear/mistrust of law enforcement. More likely to trust HCP or a social worker.
5. Drug addiction; cannabis addiction, memory loss/PTSD.
6. May not remember what city they are in at present.

7. Sleep where they work and have no private space.
8. Sometimes appear well-groomed/dressed with nails and hair done well. (In contrast to red flag #1.)
9. May not seek help as they are threatened that if they tell anyone, they or their families are threatened to be hurt. be hurt.
10. May be psychologically brainwashed based on fear or misplaced feelings of love; based on financial debt fear, where they are charged for rent and food and gas money for transporting them, even though they are told if they save up money, they can buy their freedom. It's extortion and worse (All similar to MK Ultra brainwashing techniques).
11. Behavioral signs: Fear, anxiety, depression, paranoia, psychosis, secrecy

Dental professionals may recognize some signs that indicate trafficking, but could they be mistaken? It is okay to say, "suspicion of Human Trafficking?" and call police. If your dental team is brave, it is important to look and get suspected perpetrator's make of car and license plate number with the State or Province documented also. Often, dental offices have parking lot surveillance cameras.

How does one differentiate trafficking from other signs of abuse or self-neglect, especially if the patient is previously unknown to you? If someone looks bruised and traumatized, sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between a domestic violence victim and a human trafficking victim at their dental appointments.

The red flags that we just listed will be blatant and noticed by dental HCP's.

What questions can we ask? ask if they need help. If they say no, then emphasize that this is a safe place to come to for help in the future. It is not always rescue in the first meeting with dental staff at an appointment.

Ontario and all of Canada, there is no mandatory reporting by Healthcare Professionals. They just advise you to call 911 or call the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline: 1 833 900 1010

You can still call 911 and say suspected of human trafficking.

In the USA, mandatory reporting exists in 10 states, but it basically applies to aged 18 and under.

HT victims are accessing dental care, but they are completely invisible to us. With future training, including this journal article, we as HCP's will strive in the future, with a teachable spirit, to learn and also teach others.

## References

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