Secondhand smoke is the most frequent cause of child maltreatment

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Sir,

Jud et al. recently published an interesting paper on characteristics associated with maltreatment types in children [1]. They are obviously quite experienced in the field of child maltreatment. Yet, to our surprise, they do not express any concern about the most frequent of all thinkable forms of physical harm namely exposure to secondhand tobacco smoking.

Children are especially sensitive. When exposed to secondhand smoke, they have double the rate of respiratory and lung disorders and are more often absent from school, which affects their behaviour and learning abilities. Even if a child does not suffer from asthma but both parents smoke, he or she will have a 40% higher rate of being absent from school due to bronchitis, pneumonia or bronchiolitis. Lastly, a smoking mother doubles the risk of cot death [2]. A comparable failure to classify the harm of smoking as a type of child maltreatment occurs during pregnancy where smoking is the first avoidable cause of preterm birth and intrauterine growth retardation [3]. Similar to the other maltreatments described in the paper, smoking and low socioeconomic status are correlated.

We do not hesitate to label smoking as child maltreatment despite the lack of intentionality of the child's carers. Smoking is a disease; a very powerful addiction with the most devastating consequences. Healthcare providers and practitioners are not acting effectively about diagnosis and treatment (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy, nicotine substitutes or varenicline). It is shameful that social security schemes fail to properly reimburse such treatments despite their high cost-effectiveness.

It is predicted that 2 billion people will smoke in 2025 with a dramatic increase in low- and middle-income countries. Paediatricians must recognise smoking as child maltreatment to prevent one of the most dramatic modern epidemics.

Conflict of interest AB has recently been sacked from the Hospital of Amiens (BMJ 2010;340:c711).

GD is being sued since autumn 2009 by the Tobacconist Union for claiming on the French TV that cigarettes kill tens of thousands people a year in France (http://www.bmj.com/cgi/eletters/340/jan12_2/c136#230352) and has received payments for consulting with Pfizer.

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