

New protocol designed to help abused women

BY ROY GREEN
Staff Writer

More than 140 health and social service workers learned a new protocol this week to identify victims of domestic violence. But for Janet Menezes, it came about 10 years too late.

"I wish the panel here today had been part of my story," Ms Menezes told an audience often moved to tears by her tale of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of a violent husband.

Ms Menezes was the final speak-

er at a day-long workshop Monday in Richmond Hill to introduce routine universal comprehensive screening (RUCS), which calls on health care workers to automatically ask every woman older than 12 if she has ever experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse.

"No one ever asked me any questions; I wish they had," Ms Menezes said, relating a series of incidents that began in 1994 in Toronto, where she lived with her husband and two children.

"In fact, I told my doctor that my husband was abusing me and asked

him to help me. He said he'd give me a prescription for an anti-depressant."

The doctor assured her he would call her husband and "get him in for a talk," but he failed to do so, she said. "The next time I saw that doctor, it was with the police and Children's Aid after my husband choked my daughter."

Routine screening should be done when women come in contact with health care professionals, whether or not indicators of abuse are identified, said Marion Boyd, chairperson of a task force on the

effects of domestic abuse.

"RUCS avoids any stigmatization, as every woman is routinely asked," Ms Boyd, the former health minister in Bob Rae's NDP government, told workshop participants.

More than 54 per cent of women had experienced some form of unwanted or intrusive sexual experience before reaching the age of 16, she said, citing a study from the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women. "More than 40 per cent reported at least one experience of incest and/or extra-familial sexual abuse before age 16."

It's a serious problem, said Det. Wendy Heaver, co-ordinator of the domestic violence unit of York Regional Police. "I like to call it the homicide prevention unit," she said.

Monday's workshop was the first step in a plan to have public health workers begin using the protocol, according to Pam Youssef of York Region Health Services.

"Public health is the best place to do this and it will be done by everyone who is in contact with women or families," Ms Youssef said. "We're hurting women by not asking these questions."

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