

FACULTY OF HEALTH AND MEDICAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF  
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## PhD thesis

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# Sexual assault in eastern Denmark from 2000 – 2010. Aspects of women`s health before and after a sexual assault

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## Summary

Sexual assault is an important public health issue with many potential short and long-term psychological and health consequences for the victims. In 2000, the Centre for Victims of Sexual Assault (CVSA) at Rigshospitalet in Copenhagen opened and since then, approximately 300 women and 6 men have annually visited the centre.

For every man and woman seen at the CVSA, a detailed questionnaire with information about the victim, their perpetrators, the assault, reporting to the police, physical injury, medical treatment, etc. is filled out. This thesis consists of three studies all based on data regarding the female victims seen at the CVSA from 2000-2010 comprising approximately 3000 women.

In the first descriptive study, we used data with special focus on how the age of the women and their relationship with the perpetrator influenced different characteristics of the assault. Findings from study I showed that one third of the women seen at the CVSA were diagnosed with a chronic health condition at the time of the assault and 20% had a daily intake of psychotropic drugs. Previous research has shown a high prevalence of both somatic and psychiatric illness after a sexual assault but less attention has focused on a possible increase in the pre-assault morbidity of sexually assaulted women as our findings in paper I could suggest. These findings therefore led to study II and III where we chose to further investigate the mental and physical health of the women seen at the CVSA. To provide information on both pre- and post-assault health we investigated psychiatric and physical health both five years before and five years after the assault and compared these findings with a residence and age matched control group of 10,004 women.

Our results show that many sexual assaults do not fit the stereotypical views of a sexual assault as a violent assault by a stranger. This information is important in order to combat any preconceived ideas about how a sexual assault looks so we can create an environment where women can seek help without prejudices. We found that women who were seen at the CVSA had an overall increased frequency of both psychiatric and somatic diagnosis, as well as higher utilisation of health care services compared with the women in the control group. This was true for both the five year period before and the five year period after the assault as a possible sign

of an increased psychiatric and somatic morbidity present before the assault for a group of the women seen at CVSA. In this thesis we are able to present data from a large sample of women and a matched control group and show both retrospective and prospective differences in health. As only very few studies within this field has utilized a prospective design, our findings provide new and unique insight into health aspects of women who have been sexually assaulted.

The results from this PhD thesis provide new information to further strengthen our primary and secondary preventive strategies. We highlight the importance of further development of referral networks and collaborative relationships between assault centres, primary care physicians, social services and mental health professionals to better provide the appropriate help for all women who are seen at the CVSA.