

Pediatricians can now be certified to handle cases of child abuse and neglect

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Dec. 4--Illinois child welfare officials are praising a change that allows pediatricians across the country to develop an expertise in abuse and neglect.

Three years ago, the American Board of Medical Specialties approved the new child abuse sub-specialty.

The American Board of Pediatrics offered the first certification exams in November.

More than 200 physicians nationwide took the exam, and the first certificates are expected to be issued in January, said Dr. Gail McGuinness, executive vice president of the pediatric board.

McGuinness said child abuse pediatricians will be able to consult on complicated cases, teach the discipline in medical schools and advance research in the area.

McGuinness said that before the board approved the specialty, members asked what it would mean for children.

"Is this good for children? Will this improve the care of children?" McGuinness said. "It was certainly felt to be the case."

In the future, a child abuse pediatrician would have to complete additional training in child abuse and neglect through a three-year fellowship program and/or clinical experience.

Kendall Marlowe, spokesman for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, said he expects the new expertise could help protect children from harm and spare parents from being wrongly accused.

"This is a major milestone in American child welfare," Marlowe said. "The medical determination of whether abuse is responsible for an injury is a critical and difficult decision, and only on TV do the answers arrive by the end of the hour."

Cook County Public Guardian Robert Harris, whose office represents thousands of state wards in juvenile court, said the change is a leap forward in protecting the state's most vulnerable children.

"There have been instances where people not familiar with child abuse miss (it). If they had someone on staff that had that kind of specialty, they may not have missed it," Harris said.

The specialty isn't being universally embraced, however.

Diane Redleaf, an attorney who defends parents against the child welfare system, said she had concerns about the new specialty.

One potential problem, she said, is that making a doctor the expert limits the ability of a court to determine abuse.

"The people who see child abuse a lot see child abuse everywhere," Redleaf said. "You end up getting a lot more false positives."

But Dr. Jill Glick, medical director of child protective services at the University of Chicago's Comer Children's Hospital, said that child welfare officials, police and courts often lean heavily on doctors like her when determining whether abuse or neglect took place.

Glick said that without an academic standard for child abuse doctors, those without expertise can testify in defense of parents in court.

"There is science. It should not be on speculation. There is a way of being educated and trained," Glick said. "We truly believe this is a sub-specialty that deserves recognition."

Benjamin Wolf, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, which oversees the Illinois child welfare system in a federal consent decree, hopes the expertise will prevent doctors without specific training from making poor judgments.

"Unfortunately, in the past, it's been a field that sometimes invites medical professionals to express opinions that are not confirmed by science or evidence," Wolf said.

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