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FIGHTING FGM

More than 1,500 victims of practice treated at St George's in 12 years

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A task force drawn from communities across the borough is to be established to fight the barbaric tradition of mutilation of female genitalia.

Battersea charity, Katherine Low Settlement (KLS) has been given a £10,000 Government grant to tackle the illegal practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), which involves cutting the clitoris or stitching up the vagina.

Denise Henry, a midwife for 23 years, runs a twice monthly clinic at St George's Hospital giving advice to pregnant women facing serious health risks as a result of FGM and sees two to six women each month.

Women who have undergone the most severe FGM (type three), or infibulation, have the opening of their vagina sealed by sewing or stapling together, leaving a tiny opening.

It is these women she recommends to be opened in the early stages of pregnancy otherwise they will have to be cut open during birth.

Ms Henry said: "I'm hoping to increase my clinic to see pre-conception women and people who have had their baby."

"If you think of type three FGM is removal of part or all of the clitoris, labia and inner lips and some or all of the majora leaving a tiny little hole like a matchstick."

"I saw a lady recently coming up to her due date, but had the chance to speak to her to make sure she knew the law and to assess to see if she had enough space to give birth."

The most common attendees



Grant: The Katharine Low Settlement, which celebrated its 90th birthday this year, will be helping to run several workshops about FGM

at St George's Hospital include Somali women who have undergone the most severe type of circumcision at age four to 12, and Nigerian women who have been circumcised at about eight days old in type one circumcision where the clitoris is partially or completely cut.

Battersea MP and Public Health Minister Jane Ellison is at the forefront of the battle and successfully forced acute NHS trusts to record FGM statistics. She said: "FGM is a very important issue for our area, and for London."

Conversations with local teachers and women in our community have inspired much of my campaigning over recent years."

According to Home Office figures more than 2,100 FGM victims sought

help at London hospitals in just three years, with more than 300 victims requiring surgery to repair damage caused.

Since 2002 the maternity department at St George's Hospital, in Tooting, has treated more than 1,500 victims of FGM.

KLS's 10 community champions will be tasked with raising awareness of the legal, health and clinical implications of FGM. They will be running a minimum of 100 workshops and events with schools, mosques, churches and community centres.

They will be working with Wandsworth Council and a number of other charities including the Elays Network. Khadija Mahamad, 21, is a women's officer for Elays Network.

She said: "This is definitely the beginning of a very long journey."

"I would love to say it is the ending but there is still a long way to go."

"I think one area we need to

focus on is the father's role.

"The men play a huge role in this and it's not being acknowledged."

"FGM is considered a women's issue - but the father should be educated."

"You hear stories of young girls being sent to Somalia to get it done and women coming from Somalia to do the procedure. It still shocks me."

Director of public health for Wandsworth Houda Al Sharifi said the council had set up a multi-agency partnership to produce a local FGM strategy and action plan.

She said: "FGM is high on the agenda for the Wandsworth Council's public health team, and will remain so for as long as it takes to help wipe out this unacceptable practice in our borough."

Anyone who is worried about FGM can contact the NSPCC's free 24-hour helpline 0800 028 3550.

Vital help and information:
Denise Henry, left

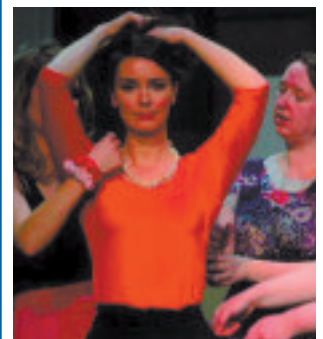
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