

# The Healer

**ASTRID HEPPENSTALL HEGER, M.D.**

Founding executive director, VIOLENCE INTERVENTION PROGRAM,  
violenceinterventionprogram.org, Los Angeles

It seems unthinkable today. But in 1983, when pediatrician Astrid Heppenstall Heger volunteered to work at Los Angeles County Hospital + USC Medical Center, children who had been sexually abused were examined not once but over and over so that experts could testify about the injuries at every court hearing. Heger was outraged by the additional and unnecessary trauma. She was incensed by how often such cases were lost anyway because the “evidence” was so subjective. “At the time, people didn’t want to believe sexual abuse was happening, and many cases weren’t prosecuted,” says Heger, whose cool blonde looks belie her fiery determination. “There was no science. Anybody could say anything.” In reaction, Heger pioneered the use of photo documentation and rigorous methods of evaluation so that kids would be physically examined only once.

In 1984 her efforts paid off, setting legal precedent in California and creating new standards across the country. “Scientific documentation brought authenticity to the investigation and allowed cases to go forward,” she explains. From there, with only a trickle of funding and no salary or staff, Heger began treating vulnerable children in a temporary clinic, an abandoned trailer located on the center’s parking lot. Authorities kept warning her off. “One administrator told me to cease and desist because building programs to deliver services for women and children was not a priority.” Heger’s soft voice gets even quieter. “It amused

“It absolutely infuriates me that the women and kids who are victims of abuse don’t have a voice,” Astrid Heger says. “My dad began as a child laborer in the steel mills of England and eventually became a college professor. He taught me to live my life to make a difference.” He would certainly be proud of his daughter (opposite, with a few young fans).

me to drive my truck around that guy,” she says triumphantly.

Over the years, social workers, counselors and police officers kept bringing her victims of family violence. There was nowhere else for them to go. “Against all odds,” Heger says, “I decided to methodically build a system that would deliver quality care and demonstrate to bureaucrats that keeping families together could create an economic model that would save money.”

In 2001 Heger’s programs officially became the LAC+USC Medical Center’s Violence Intervention Program (VIP), which raised \$2 million and moved into a renovated facility in 2003. Today, with an \$8 million operating budget from government contracts, VIP is a care center that annually evaluates more than 5,000 victims of family violence, sexual assault and elder abuse. Recently divorced and with three grown sons, Heger runs VIP, teaches, writes, testifies as a medical expert and has been showered with awards. But she’s far from satisfied.

For Heger, success is measured only by how effectively VIP stops violence and helps victims. “You’re not allowed to use Medicaid to pay for things victims need, like cosmetic surgery and orthodontia, so kids can smile again after their faces have been beaten to a pulp for years,” she says. In response, VIP supporters have launched H.E.A.R.T. (Helping Ease Abuse-Related Trauma), a group that raises about \$100,000 a year privately for such family needs. “We’re the only center that does this.

“There’s no question that I work in a very dark place,” Heger continues. “But there are people who get it and make it possible to grow new programs. I hear about acts of horrible meanness, violation and abuse every day. But it’s the acts of kindness that really make me weep.”

