

Elder Abuse In Canada
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June 14th 2007 was World Elder Abuse Awareness day. According to the Ontario Seniors' Secretariat website, "Between 64,000 to 160,000 of Ontario's 1.6 million seniors have experienced, or will experience, some form of financial, emotional or physical abuse."

Three Types of Elder Abuse

A very common type is physical abuse, which is described by the National Clearing house on Family Violence (NCFV) as "the use of force that may result in bodily injury, physical pain or impairment". Examples of this type of abuse include beatings, slapping, punching and unreasonable use of restraint or confining the elder to a room, including sexual abuse and neglect (not providing the elder with needed items or care).

The second type is emotional/psychological abuse. It is often defined as "the infliction of anguish, pain or distress through verbal and non-verbal acts", according to the NCFV. Some examples include threats, intimidation, treating the senior like a child, belittling their spiritual or religious beliefs as well as humiliation or the isolation of the elder.

Financial abuse is the inappropriate use of the property or finances of an elder person by a person in a position of trust. Unauthorized use of an elder's credit/debit card(s), stealing or mishandling property or assets, etc, are some examples of this third type of abuse.

In Ontario there currently is no specific statute that deals with the rights and freedoms of all seniors. However, the *Long-Term Care Homes Act, 2007* will provide a Residents' Bill of Rights. This act is not yet in force. Under current legislation it is mandatory to report all cases of abuse or suspected abuse in nursing homes to the Regional Office of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

Who are the abusers?

In most cases, the abuse is by a family member or spouse or significant other. Additionally, the abuser is often dependent on the elder for accommodations or money.

Often the abusers are well-meaning family members, which find caring for an aging relative to be more taxing than they had anticipated. This is especially true if the elder person is infirm or experiencing diminishing mental capacity.

Adult sons are most frequently named as physical abusers. In most cases the physical abuse is accompanied by another form of abuse, such as neglect or psychological abuse.

Who are the victims?

Some victims of physical abuse and neglect are incapable (physically or psychologically) of stopping the abuse. Fear of further physical abuse or abandonment keeps others quiet. For the majority of abuse victims their silence is induced by feelings of guilt or shame.

Sometimes the abuse goes unreported due to a lack of knowledge about the signs of abuse, or belief that the abuse is not serious if there are no visible or serious injuries. Many do not know where they could go for help with their situation or where to report the abuse.

Solution

Before elder abuse can be stopped several things must happen.

Abusers and victims alike must recognize that a crime is involved. They must realize that when appropriate the justice system will intervene on the victim's behalf. Also, the public must become aware of the problem and its obligations in combating it.

There are limitations in using the criminal justice system. Police and law enforcement need more training in recognizing elder abuse and dealing with elders as victims. In many cases, while prosecuting and investigating these crimes, there is difficulty in establishing guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. However, this does not diminish the responsibility of the police and Crown's responsibilities.

Prevention

Alcoholism and drug abuse and a family history of violence are known indicators for potential abuse of the elders. Plans should be made early on to mitigate or eliminate the risk factors when a senior decides to share accommodations with their family or life partner. Additionally, caregivers should receive training in managing and reducing stress as well as anger management courses because caregiver stress is a major risk factor for elder abuse and neglect.

When the senior is unable to recognize their own vulnerability; their family and community must become more proactive in the care and well being of the elder. On the other hand a senior may want to identify someone and make arrangements before they become incapacitated. The person they trust will deal with the legal and/or financial issues, if the need arises for their help.

Where to go for help

If you are being abused or suspect an elder is being abused, there are many resources available. Check out the web at http://www.cnpea.ca/Fact7_WEAAD_q4.pdf for some ideas. You can also contact the police, or community legal services, Victims services, Crisis centre of crisis line, Women's centre, Social service agency, or a Healthcare centre, clinic or hospital (family physician).