

National Ageing Research Institute submission to Royal Commission into Family Violence

The National Ageing Research Institute (NARI) was pleased to see that the Terms of Reference and Issues Paper for the Royal Commission into Family Violence made mention of older people as a particular group in the community affected by family violence.

While it can often go unrecognised in the community and amongst service providers, elder abuse is a form of family violence. Importantly, the impact on older victims of any abuse may be exacerbated by the challenges of ageing, and this needs to be taken into consideration in any policy development or service provision.

Elder abuse is defined as any act which causes harm to an older person and is carried out by someone they know and trust, such as family and friends. Like other forms of family violence, elder abuse may be psychological, financial, physical, social or sexual, and can also involve neglect. For some older people this abuse can be compounded by the circumstances of ageing, including their possible increased need for support and care.

Lack of recognition and under-reporting means that the extent of elder abuse is difficult to estimate, but research indicates it is experienced by approximately 2–6 per cent of older people in Australia (Cooper, Selwood, & Livingston, 2008; Kurrle & Naughtin, 2008). Some examples of elder abuse include verbal abuse and threats to cause harm; physical abuse such as kicking, shoving and rough handling; taking up residence in the older person's home for reasons other than the benefit or care of the older person; threatening or coercing an older person into handing over an asset; preventing contact with family or friends; physical restraint; and taking over the decision-making and finances of a competent older person without authority.

Elder abuse as a form of family violence

Elder abuse is often seen as a separate issue to family violence, however the two have many similarities and the occurrence of family violence at any age can continue on to become elder abuse in later life. Recent research NARI has carried out with Seniors Rights Victoria indicates that approximately 67 per cent of elder abuse is perpetrated by a son or daughter of the older person, and 92 per cent of alleged perpetrators are related to the older person (including those in a de facto relationship) – clearly demonstrating that elder abuse is a family issue.

While elder abuse is largely a gendered issue – with the victim more likely to be female (72.5 per cent) and the perpetrator more likely to be male (60 per cent) – elder abuse significantly affects older men, particularly those who are vulnerable or dependent.

Many of the same factors that contribute to family violence contribute to elder abuse including gender inequality; the use and abuse of power within relationships; a history of family conflict; and community attitudes, particularly some societal ageist attitudes that see older people as a burden on the wider population.

Research has shown that recognised contributing factors of family violence, such as financial pressures (including gambling issues), alcohol and drug abuse, mental illness, and

social and economic exclusion of perpetrators and victims, are also known risk factors for elder abuse. Risk factors for elder abuse also include caregiver stress, and poor physical health, frailty and functional dependency of the older person (Johannesen & LoGiudice, 2013). While we understand what the risk factors of elder abuse can be, more research is needed to understand why some people with these risk factors perpetrate abuse against elderly relatives.

Many reasons that inhibit victims from reporting family violence also apply to elder abuse. This includes concern about who will provide care, shame about the private nature of the family conflict, and an unwillingness to cause further conflict. Along with social isolation (sometimes exacerbated by disability) and a lack of awareness of the services available to assist, these factors act as barriers that can prevent older people from engaging with family violence or elder abuse services. That family violence services are largely focused on women and children may also inhibit older women, and men, from requesting assistance, and the assistance of these services may not be appropriate to their particular circumstances.

There can be a lack of awareness of the existence of elder abuse amongst the staff of both family violence services, and of community and care services aimed at older people. This means signs that abuse is occurring may not be picked up, or staff may not be sure what to do when abuse is suspected. This unfortunately means many occurrences of elder abuse go undetected.

Seniors Rights Victoria provides legal and advocacy support to victims of elder abuse, and research has shown that this kind of multidisciplinary intervention can be successful at stopping or reducing the abuse and protecting the older person (Alon & Berg-Warman, 2014; Rizzo, Burnes, & Chalfy, 2015; Wilber, Navarro, & Gassoumis, 2014). However, as there is a lack of community awareness about elder abuse there may also be a lack of awareness of Seniors Rights Victoria and its service, so there are potentially many older people experiencing elder abuse who are not receiving assistance.

National Ageing Research Institute

The National Ageing Research Institute is a centre of excellence in Australia for research into ageing and improving the quality of life and health of older people. As well as research in healthy ageing, dementia, pain, and public and preventive health, NARI works to improve the wellbeing of particular groups in the community, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; Indigenous people; and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender older Australians. In recent years NARI has increased its research into elder abuse, and is currently working on multiple projects with Seniors Rights Victoria to understand more about the issue.

Recommendations to the family violence commission

- Any campaign regarding family violence, the rights of women and the responsibilities of men, should also address attitudes to older people and aim to increase public awareness of elder abuse.
- Service provision, including the provision of information about family violence, needs to be accessible by older people and inclusive of their particular circumstance.
- There needs to be education and training to ensure health professionals, law enforcement, financial institutions, counsellors and service providers understand elder abuse, are able to identify possible occurrences, and know what to do in response.
- Further research is needed about possible conflict arising within intergenerational family homes, including adult children moving back in with elderly parents, and older parents moving in with adult children. Increased public awareness and understanding of the possible conflict in these circumstances may help families and older people make better plans for their future.
- Further research is needed into the motivations of perpetrators of elder abuse. A lack of understanding of carers and family members about frailty, chronic or age-related conditions such as dementia, and the needs of people as they age may increase the occurrence of unintentional elder abuse, which also needs to be addressed. It is sometimes considered that the stress of caring for an older person can contribute to the occurrence of elder abuse, however, while this may be an exacerbating factor in some situations it is neither the primary reason nor an excuse for family violence against an older person.

References

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