

MISSING VOICES


Views of older persons on elder abuse



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INPEA



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Executive summary

Elder abuse, the mistreatment of older people, though a manifestation of the timeless phenomenon of inter-personal violence, is now achieving due recognition. Prevalence studies concerning abuse of older persons have so far been restricted to developed nations. In developing countries, though, there is no systematic collection of statistics or prevalence studies, crime records, journalistic reports, social welfare records and small scale studies to provide evidence that abuse, neglect and financial exploitation of elders are widely prevalent.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognised the need to develop a global strategy for the prevention of the abuse of older people. This strategy is being developed within the framework of a working partnership between the WHO Ageing and Life Course unit of the Department of Noncommunicable Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, the WHO Department of Injuries and Violence Prevention, the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA), HelpAge International and partners from academic institutions in a range of countries.

The initial step towards developing the global strategy was the set up of a study in eight countries: Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Canada, India, Kenya, Lebanon and Sweden. The study's main approach involved the conduct of focus groups with older persons in the community, and with primary health care workers, in order to establish components of elder abuse as identified by older people themselves and by those forming the primary health care teams. A focus on primary health care context was chosen as it is within this context that elder abuse can first be identified—or overlooked altogether. Making primary health care workers aware of the problem is thus a crucial step in preventing and/or managing elder abuse.

This report presents the design and findings of the study, and the conclusions of a meeting (Geneva 11–13 October 2001) aimed at identifying the indications for policy, research and action emerging from these study findings. Reports from each country prepared by the national teams were reviewed and analysed at the meeting.

Analysis of the major themes revealed remarkable similarities across the participating countries. Older people perceived abuse under three broad areas:

- Neglect — isolation, abandonment and social exclusion
- Violation — of human, legal and medical rights
- Deprivation — of choices, decisions, status, finances and respect

The conclusions contain recommendations for action, some of which are already being implemented, with others to follow in the near future. These recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- To develop a screening and assessment tool for use in primary health care settings
- To develop an education package on elder abuse for primary health care professionals
- To develop and disseminate a research methodology 'kit' to study elder abuse
- To develop a Minimum Data Set concerning violence and older people
- To ensure dissemination of the research findings through scientific journals
- To develop a global inventory of good practice
- To mobilize civil society through raising awareness of the widespread magnitude of elder abuse

Introduction

There are few studies that explore elder abuse from the perspective of older adults cross-culturally, and most of these begin with existing classifications of the meaning of abuse.

The World Health Organization (WHO), the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) and partners decided to set up a study which challenges existing definitions. This study begins by asking older persons and primary health care workers themselves a series of questions in order to understand what their perceptions are, how they themselves classify elder abuse and what they perceive as the first steps needed for a global strategy against the abuse of older people.

Despite methodological constraints, this study provides the first multi-country set of information about elder abuse. While the data is limited it provides a richness from which to generate many future research projects as well as a platform for action. The individual and collective responses cannot be generalised either nationally or globally and, as with all such projects, many new questions have emerged. However, the findings do throw new light on how to perceive and approach elder abuse. Ultimately the challenge for us all is not only to listen to what has been said, but to believe and act upon it.

1. Background

1.1 The history of elder abuse

The timeless phenomenon of inter-personal violence has, in the latter part of the twentieth century, been framed within age-specific compartments. Societally hidden, but manifest in literature, child and wife abuse were the first to emerge. Both types of abuse were framed as family violence issues and were originally called baby battering and wife beating respectively. Eventually, the problem of elder abuse (which was initially called “granny battering”) emerged. The abuse of older people was first described in British scientific journals in 1975 (Baker 1975, Burston 1977). In the US, these reports were immediately viewed as a socio-political concern, and quickly led to legislative action. In the UK, it took a further 15 years for the issue to receive research and political credence (Ogg and Bennett 1992). The growing world-wide focus on the abuse of older people since then has sought to parallel the focus upon human rights, gender equality and

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