
Elder Abuse and Dementia

Elder abuse - it's often called the "hidden crime" because it can be inflicted in very subtle ways and can be concealed in the nursing home where its victims are vulnerable and unable or afraid to report it.

By Maureen Etkin

The 'hidden crime' of elder abuse

A dementia makes one easy prey for abuse

Abuse of the elderly is not a new phenomenon; however, it has, more recently, been receiving increased attention by the media. Abuse of the older population is gaining greater recognition as a significant health and social problem for our society due, in part, to the aging demographics. Currently, seniors (65 and older) comprise 13% of the Canadian population. Statistics Canada predicts that by 2026 this will increase to 21%.

Unrelated caregivers

The general public believes that most abuse occurs in the commu-

nity. However, 24 percent of all abusers are unrelated caregivers; so abuse is happening in long-term care/assisted living facilities. (Statistics Canada, no. 85-224).

What is elder abuse

Several different definitions are used to define elder abuse. In 2002, the World Health Organization defined abuse of older people as: *"Single or repeated acts, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within a relationship where there is an exploitation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person."*

Elder abuse is a difficult subject. It can have a number of manifestations that are not always recognized or accepted as abuse. Often, it is unintended; but poor care practices or ignorance is not an acceptable excuse.

"Hidden crime"

Abuse is often referred to as a "hidden crime" because it can be inflicted in very subtle ways, and it is easier to hide abuse in long-term care settings where the victims are vulnerable and unable, or afraid, to report it.

On the following page, many of the risk factors mentioned are present in residents with a dementia; thus, they may be susceptible to higher risk of abuse.

A recent study sponsored by the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research looked at the pattern of prescribing tranquilizers to residents in 24 Alberta nursing homes. The ratio for prescribing these drugs was found to be much higher in Canada than in the United States or Europe. Some health care profes-

Elder abuse in institutions

(Living in long-term care homes in Canada)

According to the report, "Seniors living in institutions are particularly vulnerable to abuse due to lack of institutional resources and difficulties faced by health care workers." (Source: Statistics Canada; No. 85-224)

• Total number of seniors aged 65+ living in institutions	287,000
• Senior women in institutions	9.2 percent
• Senior men in institutions	4.9 percent