

## **World Elder Abuse Awareness Day 15 June 2011**

Wednesday, 15 June 2011 marks the sixth annual World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. As the name suggests, it is a day set aside to increase global awareness of an often hidden problem that was considered to be a “family problem” prior to the mid 1970’s. It is increasingly identified for what it is: a shameful problem that is moral, medical, and social in nature and denies vulnerable adults their rights to live with dignity.

What, then, is elder abuse? It is generally recognized as the mistreatment of adults sixty years of age and older and may include disabled adults who are younger. It may be defined as “. . . a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person.” (United Kingdom, Action on Elder Abuse 1995)

The mistreatment may be intentional or unintentional. It may be physical, such as hitting or shoving, physical or chemical restraint (use of devices, e.g. bed rails, or sedating medications), or anything that causes physical injury or pain. It may be emotional or psychological, such as verbal abuse, threats, isolation, social exclusion, or anything that causes mental anguish. It may be financial, such as diversion of a vulnerable adult’s property or funds, or it may be sexual abuse. It may also be abuse by neglect (withholding of necessary care or services by the person(s) responsible for providing those services to the vulnerable adult).

Age-related changes cause us to become increasingly vulnerable as we face multiple challenges. Physical changes may occur that cause alterations to vision, hearing, mobility, and speech and an overall “slowing down”. Mental changes may include such conditions as slowed thinking, forgetfulness, repetitive behaviors, depression, and dementia. These and other changes place us at increased risk to become victims of one or more forms of abuse.

Who are the victims of abuse? They are the vulnerable adult who may be sitting in the pew three rows behind you in church or the elderly neighbor who lives four houses down the street from you. They are your beloved uncle’s roommate in the nursing home or adult family home. They may even be your mother or your uncle. They may appear quite normal, or they may seem “skittish” around certain people, perhaps drawing back when approached.

Who are the abusers? They may be paid or volunteer caregivers in long term care facilities such as nursing homes and adult family homes. Most often they are family members (spouses, adult children) who may not realize the abusive nature of what they are doing. They may be new acquaintances who have targeted and groomed an elderly person for the purpose of financially exploiting that person. Trust all of your senses, not just what you are told. If something doesn’t look or feel right, it very likely is not right.

Why do they abuse? Rarely does anyone intentionally plan to abuse another person, yet it does happen. The majority of abusive acts are committed when caregivers experience one or more of the following: burn out, lack of training, lack of understanding of the extent of the elder's care needs, exhaustion, lack of relief or respite care for the elder, substance abuse, depression, past history of violent behavior. Low pay and long hours are additional factors for some paid caregivers.

Why do the victims not report what is happening to them? Many are unable to verbalize what is happening to them. Others fear retaliation or that there will not be anyone to care for them if they tell. Others tell and are not believed. If the abuse is at the hands of family members, the victims feel a tremendous sense of shame and often believe it is their fault, that they have somehow caused the abuse to happen. Any discussion of mistreatment is considered taboo. That taboo must not be violated, so the victim continues to suffer silently.

Where does abuse occur? Quite literally, it occurs anywhere - in private homes, in long term care facilities, and in the community.

How prevalent is elder abuse? Due to the general lack of reporting, the exact incidence in developed countries is not known. In the United States, 500,000 – 1 million incidences of elder abuse are reported to law enforcement annually. For every instance actually reported, another twelve to thirteen are not.

**For additional information or where to report (if imminent danger, call 911):**

**National Center on Elder Abuse:** <http://www.ncea.aoa.gov/>

Multi-disciplinary consortium dedicated to the prevention of elder mistreatment. Lots of good information found here.

**State of Washington Adult Protective Services: (206) 341-7660 or 1-800-221-4909**

Call this number to report suspected or actual abuse of elderly or disabled persons who do not live in long term care facilities.

**State of Washington Complaint Resolution Unit: 1-800-562-6078**

Call this number to report concerns about abuse or neglect in long term care facilities (nursing homes, adult family homes, or assisted living facilities). You will reach a recording that will ask specific questions. You may give your name and telephone number to discuss your concerns further or you may report anonymously.

Unless each of us does our part by learning how to recognize elder abuse and what to do about it, abuse of the elderly will continue to increase in both incidence and severity.

**NO ONE DESERVES TO BE ABUSED.**

## **References and Resources**

**HelpGuide:** <http://www.helpguide.org/>

Excellent resource. Internationally acclaimed non-profit provides accessible, well-written information about mental and emotional health and other health-related issues for all ages, including seniors. Has bullet lists describing different forms of elder abuse and what to look for.

**United Kingdom Action on Elder Abuse:** <http://www.elderabuse.org.uk/>

At the vanguard of elder abuse awareness.

**United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:** <http://www.usccb.org/>

Here is where you will find the document “Seven Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching”. It is in a summarized and very accessible form on the parish website: <http://www.stbens.net/parish>.

**World Health Organization:** <http://www.WHO.int/en/>

The health-related branch of the United Nations. Of particular interest are the sections titled “Department of Ageing and Life Course” and the “Department of Injuries and Violence Prevention”. See the article published in 2002: “Views of Older Persons on Elder Abuse” 1.1