Responding to the abuse of older people

Abuse of older people has been defined by the Australian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (ANPEA) as ‘any act occurring within a relationship where there is an implication of trust, which results in harm to an older person. Abuse may be physical, sexual, financial, psychological, social and/or neglect’.

Physical abuse can include being hit, sexually assaulted, burned or physically restrained. Psychological abuse can include humiliation, insults, fear, threats or being treated like a child. Financial abuse is making use of an older person’s money without their knowledge or permission and includes forgery, stealing, forced changes to a will, transferring money or property to another person, withholding funds from the older person, the failure to repay loans, and the misuse of enduring powers of attorney. Neglect can include passive neglect, which refers to older people being left alone, isolated and forgotten and active neglect, which is the withholding of items that are necessary for daily living, such as food and medication. The findings from Australian research suggests that psychological and financial abuse, both non-physical forms of abuse, are the types of abuse most likely to be experienced by people aged 65 years and older.

Barriers to older people reporting abuse include diminished cognitive capacity, mental or physical disability, poor or restricted mobility, a lack of awareness of what constitutes abuse, lack of knowledge of their rights or resources, social isolation or fear of alienation, the need to preserve a family relationship, dependency on others in the family, the stigma and shame associated with abuse, fear of reprisal from the perpetrator, and a perceived or actual lack of options or access to services.

Abuse of older people is a public issue requiring a community response and, in serious cases, a criminal justice response. However, the only mandatory reporting on the abuse of older people in Australia is under the Aged Care Act 1997 which requires residential aged care providers to report unlawful sexual contact and unreasonable use of force.

A number of reports have recommended mediation as offering a middle way between doing nothing and reporting the abuse to the police or the Guardianship Board which the older person often does not want. To this end, the Preventing the financial abuse of older people Linkage Grant project is developing and trialling a mediation model to assist in preventing financial abuse of older people by a family member. Details are available at:

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