Awareness of the abuse of older people

I expect that all of you here today are in some way involved in providing services for older people and are keen to provide the best services possible. Today, we want to talk to you about the abuse of older people and what you as service providers can do to help.

128 older people have been assisted from Aged Rights Advocacy Service's Abuse Prevention Program since October last year and of these 57.6% were receiving HACC services. This means some of the people you are assisting are likely to be experiencing abuse.

Do you know how many of your clients over 65 years are being abused? Would you and your staff recognise abuse and know what to do?

Although there has been very little research in relation to the abuse of older people, some research in Australia has estimated that up to 3 to 5% aged 65 plus are abused. (Kurrle SE, Sadler PM, Cameron ID, 1992 Patterns of Elder Abuse, Medical Journal of Australia Vol. 15, 672-676) In South Australia this could mean between 5911 to 9852. (1996 Census)

Over the past 20 years abuse of older people has been acknowledged as a social issue. In earlier days people spoke of “granny bashing and responded in a protective manner. Services reflected the child protection services. Adult protection programs still exist in America today.

In Australia recent thinking in preventing and responding to abuse has stepped away from the protective model and has recognised the rights of older people to determine their own needs and wishes whenever possible in how they will choose to respond.

Since September 1997 Aged Rights Advocacy Service has been able to provide assistance to older people who are at risk of, or are, being abused. The ARAS Abuse Prevention Program amalgamated the Elder Protection Program into its activities.
In addition to the Abuse Prevention Program, ARAS has two other programs; these being providing assistance for older people to exercise their rights where they receive services either from Commonwealth Government subsidised nursing homes or hostel, or community services to help them to remain living in their own home.

Today we are going to talk you about what older people have been saying to us. As abuse is often hidden we want to pass on information about how you can be alert for abuse and what you can do to assist older people in these situations.

Definition

When I speak about abuse, I am talking about older people being abused by those they trust and may possibly be dependent upon that person for personal care and assistance. This is different from the abuse of older people by strangers such as bag thieves or door sales people.

The definition of abuse which we use at ARAS is;

“Any action or lack of action occurring within a relationship where there is an implication of trust, which results in physical, psychological, financial, or social harm to an older person.” (overhead)

The Abuse Prevention Program has found that in the majority of callers asking for help were females abused by their adult sons and daughters (43.4%) and in 29.3% of cases live with them. Callers indicate in the majority of instances they are being abused financially and/or physically.

What are the forms that Abuse takes?

We can see from this definition abuse may take many forms and may involve creating fear, intimidation, theft, emotional deprivation, verbal abuse, assault, sexual violation, isolation and neglect. It occurs between persons connected by relationships, usually in the privacy of the home. When it is intentional it is part of a pattern of behaviour used to establish and maintain power and control over another person. It is largely hidden and under-reported.

As service providers you may have found yourselves in situations where you felt uncomfortable about how you saw an older person being treated. Because the abuse was happening within a family you may have felt uncomfortable about becoming involved. What we are saying to you is that older people need to get the message that abuse is not ok. The older person will need support and the opportunity to talk about what is happening and to take steps to protect themselves in other situations you will have a clear duty of care.
What the common risk factors associated with the abuse of older people?

There are a number of factors which have been recognised to contribute to abusive behaviour. These may occur in isolation or in combination with each other. But the abuse of older people rarely has one identifiable cause.

Sometimes, carer stress is associated with the abuse of older people. The stress of caring, like all other stresses may well be a causative factor, however it is just one of the many possible causes. It should be noted carers can also experience abuse from the person they care for.

Other underlying factors have also been identified.

Abuse may be triggered by the behaviour or needs of either the abused person or the abuser. Physical or psychological impairment or dependency of either person may contribute to abusive behaviours. Substance abuse, lack of support services or isolation may all be risk factors. Elder abuse may be part of a lifelong abusive family relationship. It may be a continuation of domestic violence, or it may have started with the onset of dementia or when the power balance in the family is rearranged as the person gets older.

Being aware of these risk factors will assist you to recognise abuse. It is important to remember that these are only indicators of the potential for abuse and we must not jump to conclusions without checking the facts in each situation.

Abuse is a hidden issue

It is important to consider why abuse of older people might be a hidden issue.

It may be that the idea that older people are abused in these ways does not sit comfortably with our notion of how families should be.

It also may be the symptoms of elder abuse are attributed to other normal ageing processes for example, fractures can be understood as being caused by brittle bones, deterioration in health as general frailty rather than a result of inappropriate administration of medicine. Sometimes when an older person reports incidents of abuse, this can be interpreted as a sign that the older person is confused and doesn't know what they are saying.

Reluctance to disclose

In fact it would seem that older people themselves are, generally very reluctant to report abusive situations. There are a number of possible reasons for this. They may feel a sense of shame for themselves and/or their families. They may believe that what is happening to them is normal, particularly if they are socially isolated. They may not know anyone whom they feel they could trust enough to tell, or who they believe will be able to help them. They may have resigned themselves to living
in this way or fear the consequences if they protest or involve others in their situation.

**Role of community workers**

In your role as community service providers you are in a particularly well placed position to identify abusive situations and provide an older person with an opportunity to talk about what is happening for them and inform them about services to assist them. You may be the only person available for some to speak to and you may need sometimes to prompt discussion by gently raising your concerns with them. We want to stress it is important that you ask the older person that next question “are you alright, do you want some help?”.

We know from our work that maintaining and creating a network of significant others around the older person is a factor which has the potential to not only minimise or stop the abuse but to impact on whether the older person will feel confident to take some action. You or your staff can be part of that network by offering support through providing information about where help is available; strategies to respond to the abuse and by maintaining contact with the person.

You have a responsibility to recognise the abuse and to take steps to ensure the well being and safety of the older person particularly if the person is unable to make decisions for themselves.

This may involve for example approaching the Office of Public Advocate for Advice.

**Outcomes to responding to abuse**

As a worker who is supporting the older person you will find each situation will be different and require a different response. You will also find there will be different, solutions and outcomes, for example:

Sometimes a person will choose to continue to live in an abusive situation. This can be difficult for those who are assisting to understand. For example the person may seek information but choose no action at this point. They may wish re contact you or somebody else later about wanting to act on one or all of the options.

An older person may choose to take control of situation themselves. Such as, a parent may decide to take care of their own needs and be less protective of an abusive son or daughter.

An older person may encourage the abusive person to seek help to deal with their own problems. Such as drug or alcohol counselling.

Others may choose to use community supports, such as daycare or respite care to reduce the build up of dependency or tension in an abusive situation.
Some older people will wish to seek professional support to assist in reducing the abuse, for example personal counselling or financial management, or meditation.

Legal solutions, such as Guardianship Orders, Restraint or Apprehension Violence Orders, or criminal charges may be required when other options are not appropriate. These are some of the options which can be taken in working with abusive situations. Options to stop abuse of older people are as varied as the experience of the individuals involved.

What can you or your agency do to increase its ability to respond effectively. You can

- Ensure all staff are able to recognise abuse. Are staff provided with the opportunity to receive abuse awareness training?
- Assist the older person to look at options and support them to seek help Are staff aware of what they could say to encourage the older person do something about the abuse?
- Identify ways your agency can assist - For example do abused people receive any priority on waiting lists or do you have and an effective system to link older people to appropriate services. What can your agency offer?
- Explore what other agencies can do to assist - Are staff aware of the role of these other agencies in working with older people?

How can ARAS assist you?

We at ARAS Abuse Prevention Program can support you by assisting you to deal with all of these questions. We are happy to be a point of contact and to assist you to respond to abusive situations through the provision of;

- **Information** about older people's rights and the resources available to respond to abuse.
- **Support** to explore strategies which focus on enhancing or developing support systems for an older people which uphold their rights
- **Education** we offer training and awareness sessions for organisations and community groups
- **Policy** we can assist you to develop policy and protocols to assist your agency to respond to abuse

The aim of talking to you today was to:-

- raise your awareness about the types and potential risk factors associated with abuse which some of the people you are assisting will be experiencing
explore how you can assist older people in abusive situations, and
how ARAS may assist you in this

The Abuse Prevention Program wants you and your staff to take action when you are concerned about abuse and to reassure older people that,

1. Abuse is not OK
2. It is not normal
3. They need to do something to stop abuse
4. Help is available
5. You can plan to protect your future

Intervention strategies can make a difference, and it is important that the older person is in control of any of the decisions or actions to be undertaken and remains in control of his or her life. In your role you can ensure the older person is given information about the options and who can support them.

We need to ensure we are upholding rights when a person says "Help me - I am being abused." How will your agency respond?