



TRANSCRIPT

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Health Wellbeing & Relationships

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Commentary | Abuse of Elderly People | It's not OK!

TONY RYAN

Welcome to Learning Works – I'm Tony Ryan. In recent times, there has been a growing community awareness of the problems in our society around the physical and even sexual abuse of children. But there is another group of people around Australia who experience abuse – and it's often not spoken about at all.

In South Australia, as in most Australian states, steps are being taken to raise community awareness of the extent of the abuse of elderly people, and to develop community education strategies. Our Learning Works commentary this week is presented by the Chief Executive Officer of the Aged Rights Advocacy Service in South Australia, Marilyn Crabtree.

MARILYN CRABTREE

In South Australia recently there have been a number of exciting developments in relation to the prevention of abuse of older people. This is an area of great interest to me as CEO of the Aged Rights Advocacy Service. We work for the rights of older people in the community and in residential care.

Our Abuse Prevention Program has been running for 10 years and hears many stories of older people being abused by adult children, grand children, other family members or friends, with the most reported abusers being adult sons and daughters.

So what is elder abuse? The abuse can take many forms including physical and verbal threats, financial or psychological abuse and neglect. It can be very subtle or extreme.

Financial abuse is the most commonly reported and this is often accompanied by psychological abuse. For example a gentleman said his son had his Power of Attorney and was taking extra money from his bank account. Whenever he asked his son about his account, the son became very angry and told him not to interfere.

Another scenario is where the son or daughter tells their parent to sign the cheque or they will not be allowed to see their grandchildren. And where an older person lends money to their family they do this on the basis of trust and often do not put anything in writing, which can be a problem down the track when the relationship sours.

They may find possessions are disappearing or they are being pressured to change their will or to make a Power of Attorney. The one common denominator is that the result is detrimental to the older person.

We receive over 2500 requests each year for information or advocacy support about rights, with 800 of those about vulnerable older people being abused by family or friends. This is what I would like to concentrate on today, as abuse is now acknowledged as a growing issue that can affect up to 5% of people over the age of 65.

The South Australian State Government has recently released its plan for the prevention of abuse of older people. It incorporates a number of strategies including raising awareness so that people know what abuse looks like, and know the safeguards they can put in place to minimise their risk of abuse. It also includes strengthening support systems which are very important for people who want to stop the abuse that is happening to them.

The strong message from this plan and those who work in this area is that older people are entitled to quality of life, and to continue to make decisions and be in control of their own lives. Some older people may not have the capacity to make their wishes known and special interventions are required to protect their interests such as the Public Advocate. Zero tolerance of abuse must be our goal. We must all speak out against the exploitation of vulnerable older people.

Our agency has been selected to implement the initial stages of the State Government plan in the next six months and we will work hard to start the process of raising awareness across South Australia.

I would like to share some of the things we have learned. Abuse does affect both men and women. It can happen to anyone regardless of their level of education, across all economic backgrounds rich and poor, and all ethnic groups. It flourishes in secrecy so one of the best things people can do is to tell someone; people think family business is private business but we all have a right to be safe. We need to recognise that abuse is a serious matter, and sometimes it is a criminal offence.

It can be very hard to speak up because people don't want to admit there is a problem or are ashamed it's happening to them, and think no-one will believe them. They may be worried about retaliation or have tried to do something before but it did not work. What people tell us is that they do not want to get their family member into trouble but they do want the abuse to stop.

One of the major reasons is they do not know their rights or that assistance is available. We have many examples where older people have got control over their affairs again and have been able to retain their relationship with their family. So the message is speak up. Abuse is not ok and we should not tolerate it in our society.

TONY RYAN

Our Learning Works commentary this week was prepared and presented by Marilyn Crabtree, Chief Executive Officer of the Aged Rights Advocacy Service Inc in South Australia. Adelaide listeners can contact the Aged Rights Advocacy Service on 8232 5377 or for country callers, 1800 700 600. Learning Works is produced at PBA FM in Adelaide. I'm Tony Ryan.