

Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV)

Elder Abuse Prevention Forum

18 June 2009

ELDER ABUSE

CAN WE APPLY A UNIVERSAL VIEW ACROSS THE CULTURES?

Thank you for your welcome and thank you for the invitation to be with you today.

Marking World Elder Abuse Awareness Day with this forum here in Melbourne links you to a global community of individuals and organisations who share an interest and concern for older people. That concern is about social justice, issues of quality of life, issues of fairness, and issues of dignity, respect and safety.

This is the fourth year that World Elder Abuse Awareness Day has been observed. The day is in support of the United Nations International Plan of Action on Ageing which, among other things, recognises the significance of elder abuse as a public health and human rights issue.

Governments, non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, religious groups, professionals in the field of ageing, interested individuals, as well as older persons themselves, will promote a better understanding of abuse and neglect of older persons during this week.

In my opening comments to your forum today, I'm going to take a look at the international view on elder abuse; then take a look at what is happening locally; then make some observations on the adequacy and difficulties in present responses, and conclude by adding ethnicity to the mix.

Is there an international or universal view on elder abuse?

One of the challenges in raising awareness and concern on elder abuse among an ethnically diverse community like ours is the view by some that abuse means different things in different cultures. How can one cultural group impose its view on another on what constitutes abuse of an elder? What happens in a family is the family's business, the voices protest.

I do not agree with those voices.

Let me start by saying that those who live in this country agree to live by the rule of law. Part of the pledge of Australian citizenship commits to 'respect the rights and liberties of Australia and its people' and to 'uphold and obey its laws'.

That commitment includes the rights, liberties and laws regarding such criminal matters as assault and fraud, and rights such as those articulated in age discrimination legislation. The commitment clearly does not make exemptions to those rights because of frailty, dependence or age.

Further, those same protests were heard when we, as a community, began to address the taboo subject of violence against women and children in the home, and also when we began to address the taboo and grievous issue of child abuse.

However, to fortify the claim regarding the universal nature of the characteristics of elder abuse, let us for a moment examine the United Nations' position or involvement in this arena.

The United Nations first adopted an International Plan of Action on Ageing in 1982.

In 1991, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 'United Nations Principles for Older Persons'. These principles were independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment, and dignity.

The statement of claim in respect to dignity was that 'older people should be able to live in dignity and security, be free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse, and be treated fairly regardless of age, gender and racial or ethnic background'.

That sounds to me as if elder abuse has a universal meaning. Race or ethnicity does not create an exemption.

The United Nations went on to adopt a second International Plan of Action on Ageing in 2002.

Allow me to quote sections from the Report of the 2002 Second World Assembly on Ageing, during which this second plan was adopted.

The report noted that there were a number of central themes running through the International Plan of Action on Ageing. The two themes in the plan of specific interest to us here today are:

- The theme of the full realization of *all* human rights and fundamental freedoms of all older persons; and
- The theme of ensuring the full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, and civil and political rights of older persons, and the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against older persons.

The report went on to state:

"The promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development, is essential for the creation of an inclusive society for all ages in which older persons participate fully and without discrimination and on the basis of equality. Combating discrimination based on age and promoting the dignity of older persons is fundamental to ensuring the respect that older persons deserve. Promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms is important in order to achieve a society for all ages. In this, the reciprocal relationship between and among generations must be nurtured, emphasised and encouraged through a comprehensive and effective dialogue."

The report concluded by stating:

"The recommendations for action are organized according to three priority directions: older persons and development; advancing health and well-being into old age; and ensuring enabling and supportive environments. The extent to which the lives of older persons are secure is strongly influenced by progress in these three directions. The priority directions are designed to guide policy formulation and implementation towards the specific goal of successful adjustment to an ageing world, in which success is measured in terms of social development, the improvement for older persons in quality of life, and in the sustainability of

the various systems, formal and informal, that underpin the quality of well-being throughout the life course.

The task is to link ageing to other frameworks for social and economic development and human rights." (end quote, italics my emphasis)

A reading of the report confirms the statement by Martin Luther King that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere". The conclusion can be drawn from the UN report that we can only achieve a fair and free society if all ages enjoy those freedoms and protections. We cannot disregard the interests of our elderly without it having an impact on the quality of the human rights and freedoms, and the degree of civility, of our society as a whole.

The United Nations is clear. Dignity and safety are international, universal values for our elders across all cultures, across all continents. And how they are embraced and protected affect the quality of every group, every society, everywhere.

What is happening in our own backyard?

If we leave Geneva and New York, and return to Melbourne, Australia, how have those universal principles been incorporated or responded to?

The state government, through the Office of Senior Victorians, defines elder abuse as 'any act within a relationship of trust between an older person and another person that results in harm to the older person. Abuse can include physical, sexual, psychological, financial or social abuse, such as neglect'.

I note Barbara Mountjouris from the Office of Senior Victorians will speak to you regarding the Victorian Government's Elder Abuse Prevention Strategy later this morning, so I will not address this initiative. I note the Strategic Implementation Plan is from 2006-2009, and am interested to hear of the progress and achievements of the plan from Barbara.

I also note that in 2006 the Victorian Government, through the Department of Human Services, funded an analysis of trends in cultural diversity, ageing and HACC services in this State. Although not specifically about elder abuse, the project is a welcome recognition by government of ethnicity as an important factor to be considered when planning services for older people. I note that ECCV's submission to the strategy supported a collective empowerment approach rather than an individualistic approach.

Another local initiative by DHS is the funding of a support hotline for older people requiring advice or support about abuse.

I will be interested to hear from the speakers here today, and from you all, and of your views on these and other local initiatives.

Is the response adequate?

Globally and universally, it is accepted our elderly have the fundamental human right to live in dignity and free of fear and abuse.

Locally, we have a government acknowledging and responding to the reality of elder abuse in our community.

But why is this subject still largely taboo or met with indifference? And is the response from government, the professions, and the community adequate?

Professor Laura Mosqueda from the University of California addressed this issue in her address at the Australian Association of Gerontology's national conference last year.

Her examination of the research established nine reasons why abuse occurs. They were: ageism, entitlement, opportunism, caregiver stress, resentment, power differential, lack of empathy, mutual conflict, learned violence, and psychopathology.

When examining the reasons why, across the world, professionals report an inability to adequately address cases of elder mistreatment, she gave five reasons:

- (i) The medical, social, legal, and financial complexity of the cases necessitates the involvement of an array of disciplines. When multiple agencies are involved, time, cost, and frustration rise exponentially for all involved, especially the victim.
- (ii) There are an array of programs scattered unevenly across our countries that come and go depending on local personalities and politics.
- (iii) We don't know enough about causes, solutions, prevention, interventions, and consequences.
- (iv) There are not enough people who are knowledgeable about the issues.
- (v) We live in a world where we can ignore this issue without complaint.

The last of these five reasons for an inadequate response is the most unacceptable. This list from an internationally respected researcher is cause for concern and should be a call to action for all stakeholders and those with responsibilities in this area.

What happens when we add ethnicity to the mix?

All of these challenges are present across the whole of the community, but ethnicity adds a further dimension to the challenge.

Data from the 2001 Census indicates that 21% of Victoria's 65+ population speak a language other than English at home. Nine per cent of this age group are not proficient in English. The implications for that are confronting. It means almost ten per cent of those who wish to call the help hotline will not be able to communicate in English. Ten per cent will not be able to read material about their rights and where to access help. At least ten per cent will not be able to read their own legal and financial documents.

Professor Mosqueda states there are four reasons an older person may have an increased vulnerability to mistreatment. The older person may:

- be more dependent on others for assistance than in the past;
- have a fear of losing independence if a report is made;
- have a feeling of shame in making a report; or
- have difficulty defending oneself (physically and emotionally)

A lack of English will increase the vulnerability in the first two areas; cultural influences may have a similar effect in regard to feelings of shame.

There is sadly little work to provide the evidence base that we need to understand and respond to the added dimension of ethnicity in elder abuse.

Conclusion

We know little of the causes, solution, prevention, interventions and consequences of elder abuse. We know even less of ethno-specific impacts and complexities.

However, that is no excuse for apathy or inaction.

This we do know:

- There is no doubt that a proportion of older people in our community suffer abuse by those they trust.
- This is the third taboo on family abuse that must be dealt with.
- It is time we talked openly about the problem and allow ourselves, as a community, to be confronted by it, so that we can develop an effective awareness and adequate response to it.
- Some forms of elder abuse constitute criminal acts of violence or fraud.
- All forms of elder abuse violate the dignity that older people deserve and that is their human right.
- Ethnicity adds to the complexity of dealing with the challenge and is a present and pressing reality in our 65+ population.
- A whole-of-life, whole-of-community, multi-sectorial response is required.

We will all, one day, hopefully, be old. But we qualify that hope with parameters of quality – health, a feeling of relevance, loving and being loved. We most certainly don't wish for our own old age to include fear and intimidation by those we trust. Perhaps if we could have a wider embrace of that view by all generations we would start to see an intolerance of abuse toward our elders who, together with our children, are the real treasures, and ought to be the valued assets, in our community.

May that goal be advanced by your considerations here today.

Rhonda Parker
Aged Care Commissioner