

Identifying abuse in older people

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Summary

This article provides a broad overview of the issues relating to the abuse of older people. Information is included to help nurses identify suspected cases of abuse and guidance on how to manage these situations is provided.

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ELDER ABUSE is a complex public health issue that may affect any older person. Nurses should be educated to identify potential cases of abuse and should act on their suspicions. Ignoring suspected cases of abuse is not acceptable and is in itself neglect and, therefore, could also be deemed abuse. The aim of this article is to raise awareness and provide information to help nurses identify elder abuse. It also offers guidance on how to deal with suspected cases of abuse in line with national and local policies and procedures.

Definition

The abuse of older people is a complex phenomenon and there is no uniform or comprehensive definition of the term which has legal status in the UK. As early as the mid-1970s various authors began to describe 'granny battering' (Baker 1975, Burston 1975), and this led to the use of similar terms such as, 'elder mistreatment', 'old age abuse' and 'granny

bashing'. However, elder abuse is the predominant term used in the literature today (Biggs *et al* 1995). The most recent consensus definition of abuse defines a vulnerable adult as: 'A person who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness, and who is or may be unable to take care of him or herself' (Department of Health (DH) 2000).

This definition has been widely criticised for focusing solely on those requiring statutory services. Similarly, the link between adult and child abuse has been criticised because of the underlying assumption that an older person, like a child, is in need of someone to make decisions on his or her behalf. More recent work has focused on the abuse of older people in the context of citizenship, where they are viewed as active members of society rather than frail and passive recipients of services (Eastman and Harris 2004).

Following the development of the charity Action on Elder Abuse (AEA) in 1993, the abuse of older people was defined as 'a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action occurring in any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person' (AEA 1995). The DH adds that abuse is the 'violation of an individual's human and civil rights by any other person or persons' (DH 2000).

Nurses have many pivotal roles in aspects of elder abuse including prevention, detection and resolution, and they are well placed to identify possible cases of abuse (Davies 1997, Pullen 1998). However, the Community and District Nursing Association (CDNA) (2003) identified that awareness of the abuse of older people is not a mandatory part of pre or post-registration nurse education nor is it a mandatory requirement for a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). This is an issue of concern because a report by the House of Commons Health Committee (2004) identified that a lack of staff awareness of what constitutes abuse – including poor practices – and inadequate knowledge and training in how to detect abuse, can lead to under-reporting of cases.