

By

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ELDER ABUSE SPANS THE GLOBE

A few years ago aging service professionals from Novgorod, Rochester's sister city in Russia, visited Lifespan. When the discussion turned to the topic of elder abuse the response of our Russian colleagues was "We have that in our country too!" And, in the last year, we've also discussed elder abuse with human service professionals from Japan, Belarus, Vietnam and Peru. They all told us stories of elders who were physically abused, abandoned or financially exploited in their own countries.

In many cultures older adults are revered and respected, but elder mistreatment of older adults is a global phenomenon. A report titled "Missing Voices" published by the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) and the World Health Organization in 2002 states that "abuse, neglect and financial exploitation of elders are much more common than societies admit."

Today is the first annual World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. Sponsored by INPEA, the day will include public events, media coverage and educational sessions to draw attention to a hidden problem: mistreatment and exploitation of older adults.

In the United States it's estimated that a half million older adults (over 60) are victims of mistreatment each year. In nine out of ten cases, the perpetrator is a family member. Elder abuse takes many forms: physical battering, neglect by caregivers to provide basic needs such as food and medicine, emotional or psychological mistreatment. It can also include sexual abuse.

Different forms of elder abuse often take place together. In one case, a frail 79 year old man lived with a niece and nephew in his own home. They convinced him to pay them \$1200 a month to live there. The niece and nephew were verbally abusive and made him feel guilty when he talked about moving out. Friends were discouraged from visiting. He lost weight because there was little food in the home; he was told to eat in his room. He was made a virtual prisoner in his own home.

A very common and growing form of elder abuse is financial exploitation. The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study in 1998 found that almost one third of elder abuse cases in the United States involve exploitation. Frail elders who are isolated and dependent on others for care or who may be experiencing dementia or cognitive decline are especially vulnerable.

In another recent case, two home contractors from Webster were arrested on charges of swindling more than \$200,000 from an Orleans County older adult. The effects of elder abuse on victims can be devastating. Elders are not only robbed of assets that they have worked for all their lives, but are also deprived of their independence, their dignity and

self respect. In some cases the impact is lethal: inflicted injuries or neglect of basic needs can result in death.

In Monroe County and nine other Finger Lakes counties, Lifespan provides social work services to stop the abuse and prevent its recurrence. We intervened in 300 cases of elder abuse in the past year, including the case of the Orleans County man. Adult Protective Services in the ten county region worked on at least as many cases. Yet, the National Center on Elder Abuse in Washington reports that only one in five cases is reported to authorities.

Community cooperation is critical to effective prevention, intervention and prosecution of elder abuse. Adult Protective Services, law enforcement, the District Attorney's Office, banks, health professionals and vigilant citizens working together are essential participants in the fight against elder abuse. Lifespan recently completed the training of 1300 Monroe County law enforcement personnel in the recognition of elder abuse. The New York State Coalition on Elder Abuse disseminates information and sponsors efforts on a statewide basis to protect New York elders from abuse, neglect and exploitation and to preserve the quality of their lives.

We must work together to uncover elder abuse, hold perpetrators accountable and prevent victimization of older adults. The first step is reporting cases of suspected abuse, neglect and exploitation. Lifespan's Elder Abuse Prevention Program can be reached by calling Eldersource at 325-2800. Each county also has an Adult Protective Services unit that will respond to cases of elder abuse.