

News

Parents reluctant to report abuse by their children

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Senior medical social worker Melissa Chew of Tan Tock Seng Hospital said this can occur if the parent and adult child live together and the child does not know how to cope with the parent urinating or defecating outside the bathroom.

She said: "To make him stop, some children resort to physical means on their parents as a form of deterrence."

Added Mrs Seah: "Aggression is often used by adult children to assert power and control over their parents in the belief that when the parents are scared, they will do what they are told.

There's also inter-generational transmission of violence, for example, if children had seen their father beat up their mother when they were younger.

Said Mrs Seah: "When the child grows up and the father has passed away or the parents are divorced, he assumes leadership of the household. To him, it's learnt behaviour to scream and shout at his mother."

Hard to spot

The problem with elderly abuse is that it is hard to spot, usually occurring behind closed doors, said Ms Chan.

Parents are also reluctant to report abuse by their children.

"For elders, taking personal protection orders (against their children) is a big step. They don't want to do anything against their son or get him into trouble," said Mrs Seah, adding the dynamics of violence means that after a while, victims can even blame themselves for it.

She cited a case of a hunchbacked woman in her 60s, whose son, who was in his 30s or 40s, punched her for forgetting things – like leaving the stove on when she went out.

"Her eyes were still bruised when we first saw her (one or two years ago). She recalled that she was pushed to the toilet bowl and her son sprayed water at her."

Trans Safe Centre director Alvin Chua said the centre is also seeing more cases of financial abuse, with children taking their parents' money or assets by using their parents' dementia to get them to alter their wills.

"It's been around for a very long time. But the ageing baby-boomer population tends to be more educated and has amassed larger amounts of assets than previous generations," he said.

Care Corner Family Service Centre (Toa Payoh) manager Frances Lee said she has seen an increase in elderly people facing difficulties in getting public housing, possibly because of financial abuse.

They might have been persuaded by their children to sell their homes during the property market boom and move in with their children, she said.

But issues may then arise that force the parents to move out and seek their own home.

Mr Chua said he has also seen cases of neighbours or co-tenants taking advantage of the elderly by "helping" them withdraw their public assistance money.

"The elderly person might not know the sum is \$450. The co-tenant can just take some of the amount," he said.

Victims of elderly abuse are also getting older. In the past five years, Ms Chew has seen victims in their 90s and beyond.

Their children could be in their 70s or even dead, and their caregivers could be their grandchildren, who may not have a strong bond with them. The grandchildren are likely to have their own families as well, said Ms Lee.

Apart from more legal provisions for abuse and specialised teams to look out for abuse cases, there could be more education on the warning signs of elderly abuse, said social workers.

"Neighbours are most in the know. They hear sounds – knocking, threats – but think it's a family issue. They don't know who to call and they wonder if they'll get into trouble if they call the police," said Ms Chew.

– Rennie Whang

"Aggression is often used by adult children to assert power and control over their parents in the belief that when the parents are scared, they will do what they are told."

– Trans Safe Centre head of family development and community relations Seah Kheng Yeow

TNP PICTURE ILLUSTRATION: GARY GOH

Some indicators of elderly abuse

Physical abuse

- Wounds, cuts, bruises. Visible scars, multiple injuries at different stages of healing
- Broken spectacles, hearing aid or walking aid
- Older person not allowed visitors
- Any sudden change in his/her behaviour

Financial abuse

- Sudden loss of funds or possessions, unusual banking activities such as the inclusion of names or signatures to older person's bank account
- Unpaid bills or lack of amenities (radios, TV sets

or fans) despite the availability of sufficient funds

- Unusual interest by family members in the older person's assets

Emotional/psychological abuse

- Older person is withdrawn, depressed, non-responsive, fearful or anxious
- Lack of eye contact, cowering, trembling or clinging
- Difficulty in sleeping, headaches, chest pains
- Expresses wish to die or is suicidal

Neglect

- Poor maintenance of older person's appearance, hygiene; soiled or inappropriate clothing
- He/she is dehydrated or underweight/malnourished
- Unattended medical needs (unexplained fractures, sprains, pressure sores)
- Consistent lack of supervision, especially in dangerous activities or for long periods

■ Source: Trans Family Services

GETTING HELP

Trans Safe Centre:
6449-9088
Promoting Alternatives to Violence: 6555-0390
Care Corner Project Start:
6476-1482
Counselling hotline (Mandarin): 1800-3535-800