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ELDER ABUSE ALERT

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT A HIDDEN PROBLEM

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Helen is a 78 year-old widowed woman who lives with her niece, Nancy, and her niece's husband. Helen has no children. Once a very independent woman and a fine seamstress, Helen has problems with dementia, osteoarthritis and slight mini-strokes. We will consider the case of Helen as we learn about elder abuse.

There were between 820,00 and 1,860,000 abused older adults in the United States, although the true national prevalence or incidence remains unknown (NCEA, 1995). This publication will acquaint you with the causes and types of elder abuse, reasons why it often goes unreported, profiles of victims and abusers, Adult Protective Services, and procedures and guidelines for reporting suspected abuse.

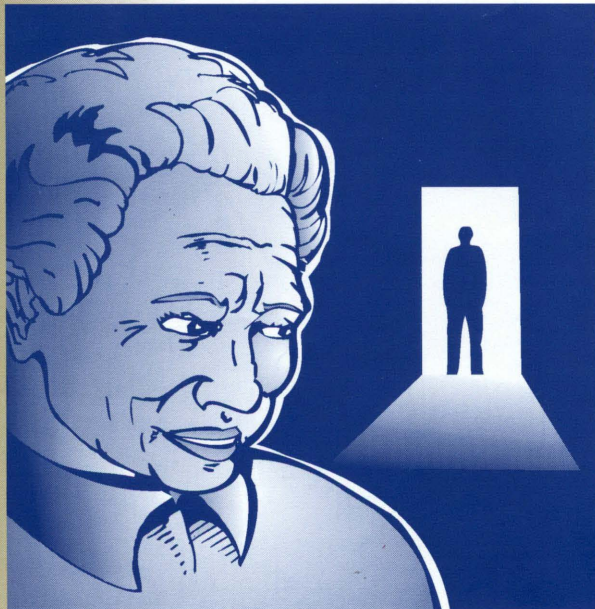
WHAT DO YOU THINK CONSTITUTES ELDER ABUSE?

WHAT WOULD BE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF ELDER ABUSE?

CAUSES OF ELDER ABUSE

Dependency and vulnerability are closely related to abuse, especially for older adults. If an abuser is the primary caregiver and the caregiver views the dependency of an older adult as burdensome and stress-inducing, the caregiver may exhibit abusive behavior. For this scenario, treating the caregiver's need for a less stressful life may prevent abuse. If the abuser is not the caregiver, the dependency of an older person creates vulnerability to persons who seek to exploit dependence. This situation is particularly convenient for persons who financially abuse older adults. Should an older person need someone to help with financial affairs, it is easy for the individual in whom the older person has put his or her trust to abuse that trust.

Helen has been declining mentally and physically for the past two years. She recently granted power of attorney to her niece, who had been pressuring her to do so. Her niece, Nancy, yells when Helen asks for special purchases, such as a bag of peppermints from her favorite drug store.



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Elder abuse is universally regarded as a horrible act, but the abuse often goes unreported. Why? According to Quinn and Tomita (1997), older adult victims fear the following:

- the loss of their caregiver, even if the caregiver is abusive,
- being alone with no one to do anything for them,
- placement in a nursing home,
- loss of privacy and family relationships,
- recriminations by the alleged abuser,
- public exposure and outside intervention,
- the reported abuse will not be believed, and/or
- they are responsible for abusive behavior.

It is easy to hide signs of elder abuse. Suspicious bruises can be partially explained by the fact that the skin of older adults bruises easily. Even if injuries are obvious, accomplished abusers will make sure that no one sees the signs. Victims may be hit on the back or buttocks so that clothing hides the signs. In comparison to child abuse, where schools make the bulk of reports, older adults can be virtually imprisoned by an abuser so that no one ever sees any evidence of abuse. Also, professionals, friends, and family are often hesitant to report elder abuse because of fear of becoming involved.

DEFINITIONS AND TYPES OF ELDER ABUSE

In particular, the concepts of abuse, neglect, and exploitation are key to Adult Protective Services, a program operating out of the Department of Social Services.

The Older Americans Act (Legal Counsel for the Elderly, 1996) provides useful definitions:

ABUSE IS DEFINED AS

The willful infliction of injury, unreasonable confinement, intimidation, or cruel punishment with resulting physical harm, pain, or mental anguish;

OR

Deprivation by a person, including a caregiver, of goods or services that are necessary to avoid physical harm, mental anguish, or mental illness 42 U.S.C.A. §3002 (13) (Supp. 1993).

NEGLECT IS DEFINED AS

The failure to provide for one's self the goods or services that are necessary to avoid physical harm, mental anguish, or mental illness (self-neglect);

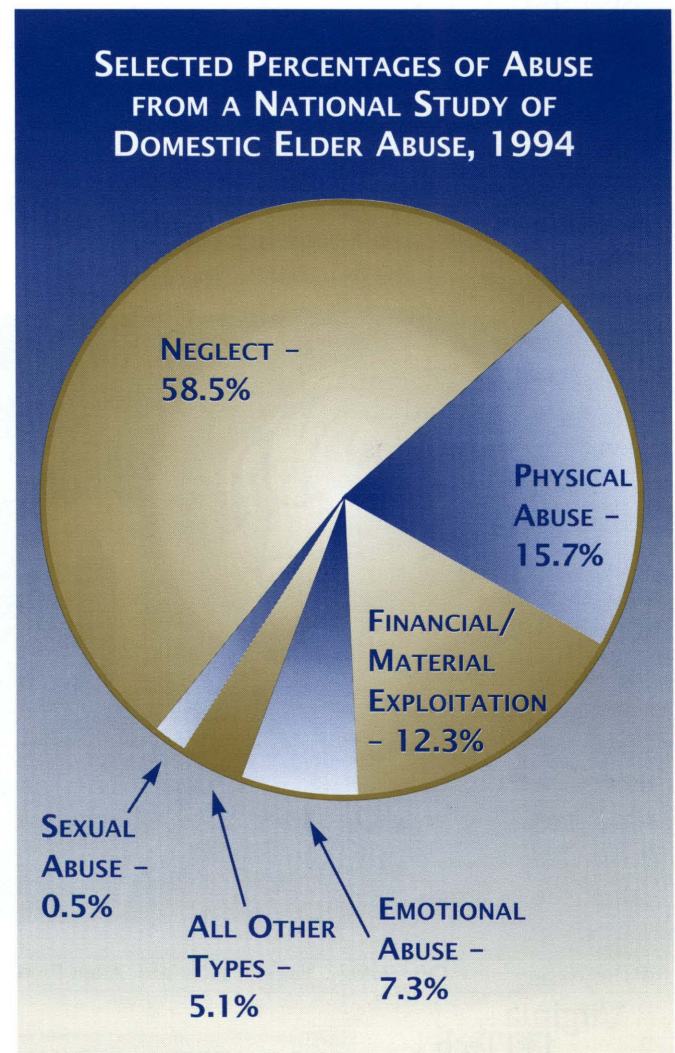
OR

The failure of a caregiver to provide goods or services. 42 U.S.C.A. §3002 (37) (Supp. 1993).

EXPLOITATION IS DEFINED AS

The illegal or improper act or process of an individual, including a caregiver, using the resources of an older individual for monetary or personal benefit, profit, or gain. 42 U.S.C.A. §3002 (26) Supp. 1993).

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) has identified seven types of elder abuse: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, financial/material exploitation, abandonment, and self-neglect.



Nancy, Helen's niece, recently used some of Helen's money to make a late car payment. When Helen saw the cancelled check, she asked Nancy about it. Nancy responded, "I have to take you everywhere anyway." She continued to raise her voice, "You suspicious old woman! Can't you let me decide what's best? You've just lost your mind!"

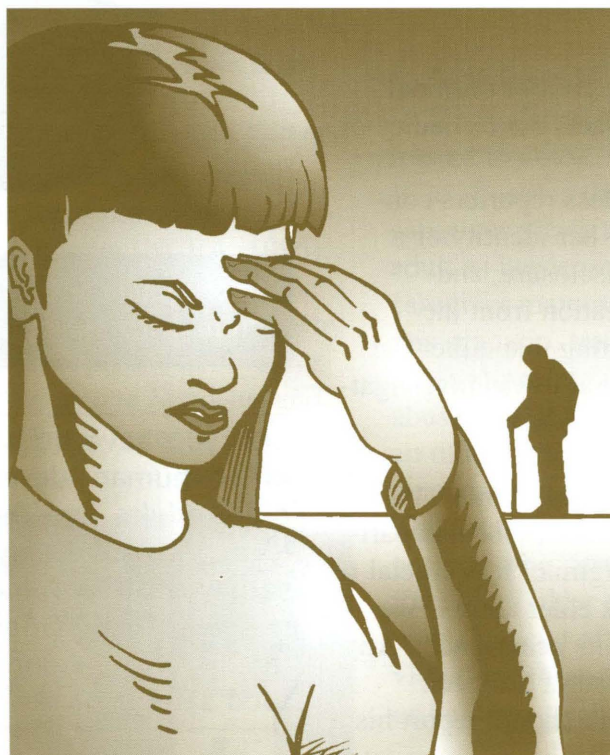
WHAT KIND(S) OF ABUSE IS HELEN EXPERIENCING?

TYPICAL VICTIMS AND ABUSERS

Power and control are underlying issues in abuse. An abuser may feel justified in doing whatever he or she does in order to gain the power and control to which he or she feels entitled. Abuse can occur in a facility or in the home; regardless, a relationship exists between isolation and vulnerability to abuse.

TYPICAL VICTIMS:

- are females between 70-80 years of age,
- have less than a college education,
- possess a poor to modest income, and
- are frail and vulnerable due to physical and mental impairments as well as other age-related changes.



IS HELEN A TYPICAL VICTIM?

TYPICAL ABUSERS:

- are caregivers who want to give good care and are, for the most part, capable of doing so. They are chronically stressed and may have lost so much control over their lives that they try to control the situation or gain power by striking out and abusing the person for whom they provide care;
- are caregivers who want to provide good care but lack the skills and knowledge necessary to do so. They may have faulty reasoning (if one

pill is good, two are better), and they may not know that they lack the skills and knowledge. They may have physical or mental problems themselves;

- are individuals who develop a relationship with older persons for the sole purpose of personal gain
- are persons who simply need to exercise power over another person.

WHAT KIND OF ABUSER IS NANCY?

ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES

Adult Protective Services (APS) programs are located within the department of social services in each county or city in Virginia. APS receives and investigates reports of abuse, neglect, and ex-

ploitation; provides a wide variety of health, housing, social, and legal services to stop abuse and prevent further maltreatment; and has the potential to intervene legally for providing essential protection for persons who are in emergency situations and lack the capacity to consent to services.

After a report of suspected maltreatment has been made to the program, an APS social worker investigates the report and, if an adult is found in need of protection, provides services

that he or she deems necessary to maintain the adult's quality of life. If there is a question about an individual's capacity to consent to services, APS decides whether he or she lacks the capacity to make critical decisions and, without that capacity, is at risk of harm. Once decided, APS may petition the court for authority to provide needed services. The court makes the ultimate decision in this case. Most protective services to adults are delivered at the request of the adult needing protection or with his or her consent. Although protective services may be administered either voluntarily or involuntarily, it is the involuntary

component of APS distinguishes it from other social services (Duke, 1997).

REPORTING SUSPECTED ABUSE

By law (Code of Virginia §63.1-55.3), certain professional groups are required to report suspicions of persons who are being abused, neglected, or exploited to local departments of social services. Mandated reporters are doctors, persons who work in the nursing profession, social workers, mental health professionals, law enforcement officers, persons employed by a public or private agencies or facilities who work with adults, and persons providing full-time or part-time care to adults.

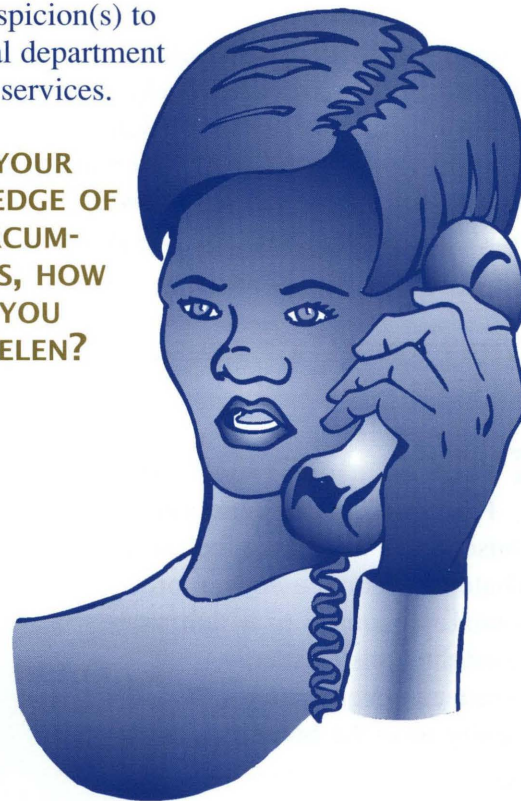
Persons who report alleged instances of abuse, neglect, or exploitation:

- possess immunity from any civil or criminal liability unless the reporter acts out of malice or in bad faith;
- maintain confidentiality unless reporters consent to disclosure of his or her identity or a court order requires such disclosure; and
- have the right to communication from the investigating agency indicating that either the report was investigated or that it was investigated and action is being taken upon it.

Over the last decade, there has been a 94% increase in reports of elder abuse to local departments of social service in Virginia. It is crucial to educate the community about elder abuse. We must have zero tolerance for its occurrence. **Any person** who believes that an adult has been abused, neglected, or exploited should report his

or her suspicion(s) to their local department of social services.

GIVEN YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF HER CIRCUMSTANCES, HOW COULD YOU HELP HELEN?



Note: By no means do most older persons suffer from dementia or great physical impairments.

If you have questions or are interested in other human development information on older adults and their families, contact your local Virginia Cooperative Extension Office. Family and Consumer Sciences agents offer a variety of educational programs related to family life, personal fitness, nutrition and food safety.

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