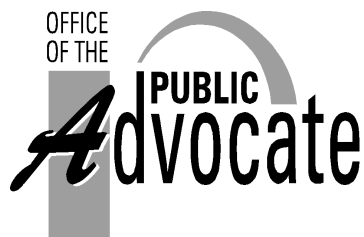


Elder Abuse in Cultural Context

Advocare Seminar: The Financial Abuse of Older Adults
Atrium Theatrette, 168 St Georges Terrace, Perth

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SLIDE ONE

Introduction

Thanks to Advocare and to Maureen for inviting me to talk about my office's work with elder abuse in Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today.

Many mainstream service providers are struggling to provide services which are culturally appropriate. This is due mainly, I think, to a lack of resources, but also to a dearth of research and relatively low levels of engagement with Aboriginal and CALD clients in the development, delivery and evaluation of programs and policy.

Today I will outline the work of my Office and describe the research we have done with CALD and Aboriginal communities around elder abuse and the initiatives developed in response to the findings.

In providing this information, I do not present myself as an 'expert'. The approach my office is putting into practice is based on advice from Aboriginal and culturally diverse people and service providers. It is largely developmental. But it represents movement

towards making our mainstream service more accessible to our ageing and culturally diverse population.

SLIDE TWO

Office of the Public Advocate

The Public Advocate is an independent statutory office holder appointed by Government to protect and promote the rights of adults with a decision making disability. This may be because the person has dementia, a mental illness, an intellectual disability or an acquired brain injury. There are about 65,000 Western Australians who have such a disability.

The Public Advocate's functions are set out in the *Guardianship and Administration Act 1990*.

SLIDE THREE

The Public Advocate has four main statutory functions:

The Public Advocate conducts investigations to assess whether an administrator or guardian may need to be appointed by the State Administrative Tribunal (known as the SAT). In 2005 the Public Advocate undertook almost 600 investigations:

- nearly half (47%) of these involved a person with dementia;
- 19% a person with a mental illness;
- 17% a person with an intellectual disability; and
- 9% a person with an acquired brain injury.

The Public Advocate may be appointed the guardian of last resort for an adult with a decision-making disability when the SAT determines that there is a need for the appointment and there is no one else who is suitable or willing to be appointed. At the end of last financial year, the Public Advocate was guardian for 256 individuals.

My Office also has a role in educating the community and other agencies about the guardianship and administration system.

Finally, the Public Advocate advises and works with government and non government agencies to develop appropriate policies, legislation, programs and services which protect and promote the rights of people with decision-making disabilities.

Demand for the services of my Office is increasing, due largely to the ageing of the population, which will bring with it an estimated increase in the number of people with dementia from 17,000 in 2004 to 79,000 in 2050. People with dementia now dominate the total number of investigations and new guardianship appointments.

SLIDE FOUR

Ageing, Elder Abuse and OPA Clients

I mentioned earlier that the Public Advocate undertook some 600 investigations in 2005-2006:

- 32% of all these cases involved allegations of abuse;

- in 33% of all these cases the victim was aged over 65 years; and
- financial abuse was the most common form of abuse comprising 67% of reported allegations¹

SLIDE FIVE

Research shows that older people with dementia or some other decision-making disability are more likely to be victims, with one study by Curtin University in 2002 reporting that 75% of reported cases involved a person with a decision-making disability².

So, in summary, in WA we have an ageing population bringing with it a four-fold increase in the incidence of dementia. And people with dementia or some other decision-making disability are the most likely to be victims of abuse.

I'd now like to discuss why this is particularly significant in the context of Aboriginal and CALD communities.

To understand and prevent elder abuse, we must understand the cultural context of family, of ageing and of disability. In WA, this requires that we acknowledge the health, social and economic disadvantage of Aboriginal people, and the barriers presented by cultural and linguistic diversity.

¹ September 2006, OPA Annual Report 2005-2006

² Boldy, D Prof., Davey, M, Horner, B, Kingsley, B (2002) Elder Abuse in Western Australia: Report of a Survey Conducted for the Department for Community Development –Seniors' Interests Curtin University of Technology: Division of Health Sciences

I will now outline two projects through which my office has commenced this process of understanding cultural context.

SLIDE SIX

Mistreatment of Older People in Aboriginal Communities

Western Australia has the third largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) population of all states and territories; just over 65,000 persons or 3.5% of the population³.

In 2001, my predecessor commissioned one of the first independent Australian investigations of its kind into the relevance and appropriateness of the guardianship and administration system in WA to Aboriginal people with a decision-making disability⁴.

The report reiterated the correlation between social disadvantage and disability in the Aboriginal community. It found “evidence of growing levels of decision-making disability resulting from the combined effects of severe disadvantage associated with substance abuse, early ageing, psychiatric disability, brain damage and traumatic life events such as motor vehicle accidents.”

These findings suggested that older Aboriginal people may be at risk of elder abuse at a much younger age than the broader population.

³ 2001 Census

⁴ OPA (2001), Needs of Indigenous People in the Guardianship and Administration System in Western Australia

Yet, despite the considerable disadvantage and disability experiences within Aboriginal communities, last year only 14 of the 600 investigations conducted by my office involved an Aboriginal person and only four of the 93 new guardianship appointments last year, appointing the Public Advocate, involved an Aboriginal person. Currently, around 6.5% of our existing open guardianships are for Aboriginal people.

SLIDE SEVEN

In 2005, I commissioned an exploration of this issue⁵.

The reference group for the project included the Aboriginal Legal Service, Derbarl Yerrigan Medical Service, Indigenous Community Volunteers, and Aboriginal policy and services staff from the Department of Justice and the Home and Community Care Program.

Two Aboriginal consultants were employed to conduct extensive consultations with Aboriginal service providers and individuals in the metropolitan and selected regional areas.

SLIDE EIGHT

Results confirmed a high level of concern amongst Aboriginal people about the abuse and neglect of some older people.

⁵ OPA (2005) Mistreatment of Older People in Aboriginal Communities Project

Financial abuse was the most commonly reported form of abuse. This included harassment for money on pension day, neglect by carers receiving payment and in some cases, physical abuse or robbery.

The research also found that the impact of elder abuse was experienced earlier among Aboriginal people. Due to mortality rates an average 17 years lower than the non Aboriginal population and the very poor health status of Aboriginal people⁶, an older person was often considered by his or her community to be someone aged in their 40s.

There was a desire expressed by Aboriginal people for government agencies to take this issue seriously and to work with communities to develop local solutions.

SLIDE NINE

The report made a range of recommendations, including targeted community education to prevent elder abuse and training and resources for Aboriginal agency staff likely to confront such situations. It was noted that Aboriginal staff required specialised support, often walking a fine line between family and cultural factors and employer requirements when working with community members.

Other recommendations were for:

⁶ ATSI Social Justice Commissioner Social Justice Report 2005, pp 17, 18

- the provision of more housing and respite options in communities;
- the development of culturally appropriate assessment and referral procedures; and
- improved responsiveness of mainstream services to prevent systemic abuse of older people

SLIDE TEN

The published report received wide publicity in Aboriginal and mainstream media, including:

- the Koori Mail
- the Australian
- ABC Radio National
- the Indigenous Radio Network
- and on the Message Stick television programme.

SLIDE ELEVEN

To help address these recommendations, my Office has supported the development of action-research project which will utilise the skills and networks of Aboriginal staff and service providers to develop, trial and evaluate a culturally appropriate pilot training package to assist staff working with older Aboriginal people and their families to identify, prevent and respond to the mistreatment of older people.

Partners in the project include Marr Mooditj (the largest training school for Aboriginal health workers in WA), Curtin University, the

Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, the WA Office of Aboriginal Health, WA Home and Community Care, the Office of Crime Prevention and the Office of Seniors Interests and Volunteering.

This project was officially announced by the Community Safety Minister, John Kobelke, in early May and I am delighted that the drivers and the focus of the project are Aboriginal people, working with the support provided by a strong across-Government partnership.

SLIDE TWELVE

Care and Respect: Elder Abuse in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

Australia is now one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. Today, there are more than 200 ethnic communities, with 180 languages spoken and more than 100 religions.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2004) has projected that the number of older Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds will increase by 66% over the fifteen years between 1996 and 2011. The older Australian-born population is expected to increase by only 23% in the same period. By the year 2020, a substantial proportion of older people in Australia will have been born overseas in a non-English speaking country. It is projected that the growth in this group will be dramatic.⁷

⁷ OSIV (200[^]) CALD Seniors – Community Participation Research Project

Although it is estimated that more than 12% of Australians with Dementia don't speak English at home, a significant number of people from CALD communities, their families and carers, are reluctant to seek help for their mental health problem. They often miss out on mental health support services simply because there is a lack of information available in their own language and a lack of culturally appropriate services - particularly in clinical assessment and service delivery.

Because of these language and cultural barriers they can find it difficult to use mainstream mental health services. And, critically, older people from CALD communities also find it difficult to know what to do or where to go if they are being abused.

SLIDE THIRTEEN

In order to gain a fuller understanding of elder abuse in a CALD context, my office commissioned a project to consult with CALD seniors and relevant service providers in the Perth metropolitan and to collate demographic information about CALD communities across the State.

The objectives were to:

- identify whether elder abuse is an issue in CALD communities;
- begin to develop an understanding of what constitutes elder abuse in CALD communities;
- gather the views of CALD people on how best to identify and respond to elder abuse;
- identify appropriate ways to raise awareness of elder abuse in CALD communities; and

- identify priorities and strategies for the future.

More than 200 CALD seniors and more than 30 organisations working with CALD seniors were consulted during this project.

SLIDE FOURTEEN

The consultations with seniors and service providers indicated that elder abuse is an issue in CALD communities - all of the seniors and service providers consulted were aware of instances of abuse.

People asked for more education to raise community awareness of elder abuse and its prevention. Financial abuse was of particular concern.

CALD seniors were identified as being at risk for a range of reasons including:

- poor English skills, particularly in relation to understanding official documents;
- social isolation and dependency on family members;
- unwillingness to disclose mistreatment or neglect because of social stigma; and
- cross-generational factors resulting in differing expectations of care and support.

Ironically, it was reported that the qualities most admired and respected by these strongly diverse cultures – loyalty to the family, solidarity with community and respect for tradition – unwittingly contributed to keeping abuse hidden and often unreported.

SLIDE FIFTEEN

The report's recommendations included:

- More targeted research to identify issues around elder abuse in CALD populations;
- Culturally appropriate community education programs targeted at seniors, their families, service providers and carers;
- Improved interagency collaboration; and
- Better resourcing of community workers.

The report also recommended that a lead Government agency be identified to develop and coordinate a whole of government response to elder abuse. The Office of Seniors Interests and Volunteering now has this responsibility.

It was also recommended that the report be referred to the WA Elder Abuse Prevention Alliance and for action – this was done in August 2006. The Alliance is currently reviewing its strategic and operational work to address the recommendations of the report.

SLIDE SIXTEEN

Conclusion

Our work has clearly shown that more needs to be done to raise awareness of elder abuse in culturally appropriate ways, and to

develop responses relevant to and respectful of the diversity of our ageing population. Older people are not a homogenous group and we have to look closely at the different needs and experiences of older people if we are going to be in a position to respond more effectively to these needs.

I view our work as part of a longer-term, strategic approach to better meeting the needs of Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

I would invite all of you to consider within your own work environment, how the services you provide can better respond to Aboriginal people and CALD communities and how, together with them, we can meet the challenge of preventing elder abuse in our ageing and culturally diverse population.