

## THE MISTREATMENT OF OLDER ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

The mistreatment of older people in Aboriginal communities is widespread, usually not reported, and has significant financial and human costs. It is reported that in most cases, the abuse of older people in Aboriginal communities occurs in families, between older people and younger generations.

Research by the Office of the Public Advocate has found that within the Aboriginal community, **financial mistreatment** of older aboriginal people was the most commonly reported abuse. In isolated communities, young people are accessing bank accounts of the older persons via the internet. Within the metropolitan area, family members would transport the older person to the ATM and watch over them and take the money once it is dispensed, leaving little or none. Another example is the coercion of the older person to apply for short term loans with no intention to assist with repayments. In Aboriginal families, relationships involve strong **cultural obligation** between grandparents and grandchildren, parents and children, and this may make it difficult for the older person to say no to pressure for money.

**Alcohol and drug misuse** and the impact on families, especially the grandparents, can become generational. Grandparents are left to care for the young children who have been neglected or maltreated due to their parents abusing alcohol or drugs. Rather than see their grandchildren be taken in to the care of the State, they will provide the necessary day to day care in order to keep the family together. Often this is done with no financial support while the parents continue to get the Parenting Allowance.

**Neglect** of older people is an ongoing concern. During my recent visit to the remote Aboriginal communities of Western Australia local community, agencies identified a high level of concern for older community members being left alone for days and possibly weeks, whilst the care-giver or family members attend funerals and sorry camps. They are left in order to be safer at home and with the best intentions; however are left with minimal food and of course supervision.

**Overcrowding in homes** is a very familiar occurrence. It is not uncommon within the Aboriginal community to find more than one family residing in one residence. The older persons have a limited ability to stand their ground with regard to maintaining control over who moves in. This can cause financial, social and emotional distress for the older person. Far too often no contribution is made towards the bills causing enormous costs resulting in disconnection of gas and electricity; food supplies being eaten by the younger members leaving the older person with nothing to eat.

The **erosion of respect**, cultural beliefs and values within the Aboriginal community has had a large impact on the older person. There is little value of the Aboriginal culture. The close kinship, the family networks, the caring has vanished. A number of strategies to improve respect and care for older people have been suggested such as, raising community awareness, providing training opportunities and taking this training to the children. Advocare is working to develop partnerships with secondary schools in an effort to reduce mistreatment at the hands of teenage family members.

Many older people put up with their situations as they feel they have no alternative, preferring to remain in the family home and consequently accept an abusive environment. To break this cycle, there must be a collaborative holistic approach across all government and non government agencies. An increased awareness of the mistreatment of older people and consequently a conduit for this mistreatment to be reported is crucial.

**Our priorities are to:**

- promote cultural awareness training
- increase number of trained aboriginal health workers
- Continue to provide culturally appropriate advocacy and information to older Aboriginal people.

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Advocare*