



Elder Abuse is Everyone's Business

The community must play their part in surveillance and eradication of elder abuse, says Advocare's **Dieder Timms**.

We have recently seen on our television screens incidences of shocking elder abuse in some residential facilities in Australia (ABC 4 Corners, September 2018). But what now? Who will champion quality care for some of our most vulnerable citizens?

The federal government has called a royal commission and there has been a state government select committee report on elder abuse but we all need to support older people now, not wait for the outcomes of commissions and reports.

As CEO of Advocare my job is to lead an organisation protecting the rights of older people in WA. We staff the WA Elder Abuse Helpline, we advocate for those needing our support in the home care and residential aged care systems, we educate the community on the complex aged care system and we support those trying to access that system.

We hear more about elder abuse than most and please don't think it only happens in residential facilities, it happens behind closed doors in family homes and often by family members.

Abuse can take many forms, including financial or material abuse, intentional or unintentional neglect, emotional or psychological abuse, social isolation,

physical abuse, or sexual abuse. Often different types of abuse may be happening at the same time. For example, an older person might be deliberately socially isolated from others so that other types of abuse are not discovered.

Elder abuse may sometimes be seen as a form of family and domestic violence, where someone in a relationship with the older person harms them or makes them feel unsafe. Family and domestic violence involves a pattern of abusive behaviour that aims to frighten or control the person, and this may take different forms in different relationships.

The World Health Organization estimates that 15.7% of people 60 years and older in the community may have experienced abuse.



This means that potentially over 75,000 older West Australians are affected and this number may be a lot higher for people in 'at-risk' categories, including older people with physical or mental incapacity and people living in institutional settings.



Figures of reported elder abuse are likely to underestimate prevalence due to the fact that only a small fraction of cases are reported.

Every week our advocates work with people who are experiencing elder abuse. Clients contact us on the Elder Abuse Helpline or via our standard advice line. We listen to their needs and concerns, assist in exploring the options, provide comprehensive resources and information and refer to other support services when needed. We support clients through conversations or actions they choose to take.

At Advocare we can take up to 90 calls a month on our elder abuse helpline and many more on our general number, and due to the underreporting and shame associated with elder abuse we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg.

Please don't 'walk past' if you think someone may be experiencing elder abuse, no matter what form it takes.

We have developed some protocols to help staff and professionals working with older people to identify and respond to elder abuse. If you suspect abuse, ask questions about that person's situation and if you think the older person is in a danger, call the police (000). The police have staff trained within their family violence unit to respond to support older people.

If the person is not in immediate danger refer them to the **WA Elder Abuse Helpline 1300 724 679** and validate their feelings. ■

ED: Dieder Timms is the CEO of Advocare.

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