

Older and Wiser: Elder abuse an ongoing issue that's worsened during pandemic

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day is on June 15 this year

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World Elder Abuse Awareness Day is on June 15, 2021. Getty Images

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, which falls on June 15 this year, has rolled around again. While it is important to bring awareness to the issue of elder abuse, it does make me wonder why in a civil society the problem continues in the first place.

Furthermore, in these unprecedented times it appears to have worsened. This sad situation exists despite continued and unwavering action taken by groups organized to prevent and deal with the problem.

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day is an official United Nations International Day chosen to acknowledge the significance of elder abuse as a public health and human rights issue. In British Columbia, in addition to the 2021 official proclamation from the province, events are being held to generate community action and engage people in discussions on how to promote dignity and respect of older adults.

Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society is hosting a discussion with presenters from the North Shore Community Response Network on June 15th at its Seniors Coalition meeting.

Vancouver Coastal Health states Elder Abuse is defined as the deliberate mistreatment of an adult that causes physical, mental, or emotional harm, or causes damage to or loss of assets. It can take

the form of abuse, neglect, and self neglect. Abuse is defined as physical, sexual, financial, and psychological ill-treatment. Neglect is the failure to provide necessary care, assistance, guidance, or attention that causes, or is reasonably likely to cause the person physical, mental, or emotional harm or substantial damage to or loss of assets. Self-neglect is any failure of an adult to take care of themselves that causes or is reasonably likely to cause within a short period of time, serious physical, mental or emotional harm or substantial damage to or loss of assets.

Unfortunately, it has been reported that there is an increase in elder abuse. In a recent report from the Seniors Advocates Office, it is stated that “calls related to elder abuse increased 17 per cent in 2019. The Seniors Abuse and Information Line received 5,558 calls in 2019, an increase of 27 per cent since 2018 – 28 per cent were related to abuse, 46 per cent to non-abuse matters, and 26 per cent were for general information.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic it has been more challenging to identify signs of abuse and neglect in seniors because of isolation, lessened face to face communication and seniors having less contact with outside activities held at seniors’ centres or seniors’ programs, where staff are on the alert for signs of abuse and neglect.

For many, despite growing awareness of elder abuse, it is not an easy thing to report. It might be good for friends and family members to recognize the signs and know what resources are available.

The Canadian Women’s Foundation states that the signs of abuse could include: changes in behaviour, including anxiety, fear, and depression, injuries like bruises, scratches or sprain, explanation for injuries that seem odd or unlikely, changes in living arrangements like new friends or family members unexpectedly moving in, changes in financial situations, including unpaid bills or missing belongings, signs of neglect, such as a lack of food, being left alone for a long time or not receiving proper medical supplies like glasses or a cane.

Another issue is that there is no centralized registry for reporting abuse so there is no consistent data on how widespread the issue is. This usually means that many seniors and their families seek help from different agencies.

For instance, they could try the Vancouver Coastal Health’s ReAct program which can be reached at 1-877-732-2899. This program receives reports, provides consultation and co-ordinates responses to adults who are abused, neglected or self-neglected.

People can also try the Seniors Abuse and Information Line) mentioned above at 604-437-1940. Their provincewide confidential phone line is “a safe place for older adults, and those who care about them to talk to a trained intake worker about abuse or mistreatment, receive information and support about issues that impact the health and well being of an older adult.”

Elder Abuse needs to be eradicated in our society. Let’s do our part.