

LIVING

Zero tolerance for elder abuse

58,000 seniors in Ontario are victims of abuse, but York agencies are focused on ending the dilemma

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer

Tying Grandma to a chair, stripping her of her life savings and threatening to abandon her is not a scene from a movie.

It happens in real life and much too often, statistics show.

The provincial government recently reported that 58,000 seniors are victims of abuse in Ontario today.

But if health-care front-line worker Maureen Hutson has her way, York Region will step into the next century with a zero tolerance approach to elder abuse.

There are no ifs, ands or buts — physical, verbal or financial abuse of the elderly should not be tolerated or overlooked. The same goes for neglect and denial of seniors' rights, Hutson said.

While the issue of elder abuse has only been in the public eye for about five years, the health-care community has known about it for much longer, Hutson said.

She is a health-care provider at Stouffville's Green Gables Manor and has some chilling tales to tell.

Hutson talks of seniors who, while living with relatives, are tied to chairs, bound in bed, locked in rooms, treated like children, rough-handed, hit, yelled at and sexually abused.

Some seniors have their money stolen, are denied affection and have long lost the chance to make decisions. And, too many seniors are neglected, Hutson said.

"They're deprived of basic needs or have no family support or both. The elderly are at a higher risk. They are ill, they have dementia or other cognitive impairment, can't speak for themselves or do for themselves. Still, the abuse can be hard to detect because they are unable to explain themselves," Hutson said. Symptoms of abuse can be mistaken for age-related changes in behaviour or illness.

"Bruises could be the result of abuse or from a fall or from poor circulation," she said.

(Social) withdrawal could be a response to abuse or from depression or grief. Forgetfulness or confusion could be abuse or loss of possessions.

No incidents of abuse have been found at Green Gables, administrator Kathleen Szela said, and staff and the residents' families are



STAFF PHOTOS/SIGERD WITTEVEEN

Green Gables resident Myrtle Robinson (right) enjoys a spot of tea with health-care front-line worker Maureen Hutson (left) and administrator Kathleen Szela.

reminded its administration takes a zero tolerance approach to elder abuse.

"We've talked to our staff about it, (they) know what abuse is. We make it clear to everyone."

To educate staff about elder abuse and how to detect and prevent it, Szela recently invited police officers to visit the Ninth Line facility to screen a video on the subject.

Hutson keeps abreast of the sensitive subject by serving on a York Region committee set up to deal with elder abuse. Established by Community Care Access Centre, a non-profit agency, the four-member committee strives to bring elder abuse out in the open with the ultimate goal of eliminating the crime.

Abuse may be hard to detect, Hutson said.

"Victims are afraid to report abuse for fear of further abuse or being taken from their homes," she said.

"The elderly have to be observed. If we suspected it at Green Gables, we wouldn't leave the residents alone with the suspected abuser. We'd encourage the visit to take place in a common area. Or, we'd make sure a staff member is in the room at all times. We'd observe. We do not accuse. But, we do take appropriate action."

Intervention is part of the process. The CCAC has set up a tool package aimed at targeting abuse. It includes teaching people how to check a suspected abuse case with-

out making it obvious.

Elder abuse, like with spousal and child abuse, "doesn't stop. It gets worse," Hutson said.

A comprehensive strategy aimed at preventing elder abuse has just been launched by the Ontario government. More than four per cent of Ontario's 1.4 million seniors fall victim to various forms of abuse, ranging from fraud to physical and emotional abuse, reported MPP Cam Jackson, minister of long-term care. Left unchecked, the number of victims could jump to 120,000 by 2021.

"Abuse of the elderly is unacceptable and inconsistent with Ontario's vision of a province where our seniors are safe, age with dignity, and enjoy a high quality of life," he said.

As Ontario's senior population grows, an even greater number of the elderly could fall victim.

"We are taking action today to reduce the potential of elder abuse tomorrow," Jackson said.

There are certain situations which can lead to abuse, Hutson said.

"They include a previous history of family abuse, financial problems, inadequate housing, chronic health problems, unable to cope with looking after home and family and caring for the elderly, or the caregiver may have an alcohol or drug problem," she said.

One major factor in an abusive situation is that the caregiver may not understand the

changes that go along with the aging process, Szela said.

Studies show financial abuse accounts for 62 per cent of cases in Ontario, while verbal and physical abuse accounts for 35 per cent. Also, 10 per cent of the abused are victims of neglect.

If the abuse is taking place in a hospital or nursing home setting, it may be because "staff may feel under stress, over-worked and under-paid. Or, it may be a staff not trained in looking after the elderly," Hutson said.

People who work with the elderly need to be educated in understanding the behaviour of the elderly, she said.

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"They need to know about anger, aggression, crying, what to do if someone doesn't want to talk, doesn't want to eat, has no interest and wants to die."

If abuse is suspected, "don't accuse unless you've actually witnessed it," Hutson advised. "Then it needs to be reported immediately."

Before calling in the authorities, try not to use the word "abuse" when talking to the suspected abuser. Use words like "there might be a better way," or "this might be a solution." The abuser may be more willing to talk, Hutson said.

If abuse is suspected, there are a number of options — talk to a doctor, nurse, clergyman, police officer, a crisis centre worker, a senior's centre, counsellor or a support group. And, in York Region, the CCAC can be called.

The province is also offering help. Vulnerable adults can call InfoAbility at 1-800-655-9092 or Victim Support Line at 1-888-579-2888 or, in the case of telephone fraud, call SeniorBusters at 1-888-495-8501.

Pioneering work to prevent elder abuse earned Dr. Elizabeth Podnieks the Order of Canada. She carried out the first national survey on elder abuse, alerted governments, health care institutions and social service organizations to the dimensions of the problem of elderly people at risk.

Podnieks is now working with the province with a group called the Round Table dealing with a comprehensive study of elder abuse. Its findings will be released next year.

As well, the province is also launching a strategy, including a public awareness campaign, development of training programs for front-line providers and the development of local service response protocol for applications across Ontario.



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Dr. H.H. Walji
6633 Hwy. 7 at Ninth Line

(905) 471-EYES (3937)

Website: DrWalji.com
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