

Victims don't report for fear of retribution: Const. Kassam

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older adults is hidden or goes undetected and believe the issue should be a health and safety priority for seniors and people entrusted with their well-being.

Elder abuse is rampant, York Region Social Services Network program manager Tazim Bhanji said.

Precise statistics are unavailable because most seniors, particularly those in the South Asian community, don't report abuse.

"We can't capture statistics," she said. "We're aware of the issue, but seniors are reluctant to tell anyone. In the South Asian community, it's a cultural issue. Seniors feel reporting abuse, be it physical, financial or psychological, brings shame to the family."

Aris Pakalns, owner of Newmarket's Comfort Keepers, providers of non-medical home care, deems elder abuse a complicated problem.

"It's a hot topic no one wants to talk about," he said. "If you're abusing someone, obviously, you're not going to talk about it. If you're being abused, you're embarrassed and fear you'll lose any help if you discuss it."

Elder abuse is more than a distasteful and worrisome issue, York Regional Police seniors safety officer Const. Robyn Kassam said. It can also be a crime.

On average, the community service bureau, in which Const. Kassam works, receives 400 calls per month pertaining to seniors 65 and older.

Most are medical, accident or theft calls, she said.

About 35 of the calls are categorized as elder abuse.

Investigating the abuse of an elderly person is complex and challenging, she said. Often, victims are not forthcoming due to fear of retribution by their abusers. Dementia can cloud circumstances and facts.

Once a case is investigated, authorities must determine if charges are applicable under the Criminal Code. Increasingly, as in the case of the Thornhill woman, where the contractor was charged with extortion, charges are levied.

Under the elder abuse umbrella, police can charge abusers with a range of crimes. These include variants of assault, failure to provide necessities of life, forcible confinement and psychological abuse, including intimidation, criminal

harassment, uttering threats and harassing telephone calls.

Financial abuse, including theft, theft by a person holding power of attorney, stopping mail with intent, extortion and fraud, is on the rise.

With seniors expected to number more than 300,000, or 20 per cent of the population, in York Region by 2031, elder abuse is rightfully topping more social service, police and community safety agendas.

Ms Bhanji, Mr. Pakalns and Const. Kassam all participated in last month's Breaking the Silence — Cross-cultural Perspectives of Elder Abuse symposium in Richmond Hill. Hosted by the Prevention of Elder Abuse Committee of York Region, a collaboration of health care and social service providers in York Region formed in 1990, the event was filled almost immediately.

Starting the delicate conversation, creating awareness and educating front-line professionals and seniors is the key to stemming elder abuse, said Mr. Pakalns, a committee member and volunteer communications officer.

Ms Bhanji agreed.

With our cultural diversity and language barriers, many seniors are unaware there is recourse against



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

York Regional Police seniors safety officer Const. Robyn Kassam goes to schools, community centres, seniors homes and other places to speak to the public and front-line professionals about elder abuse.

elder abuse. She supports a vigorous awareness program within places of worship and community centres and services dedicated to helping the elderly at risk.

The information must be linguistically sensitive, she said.

If you or a senior suspect abuse

of any kind, do not remain silent, Const. Kassam said.

"Be vigilant, be bold, have a voice and speak," she said.

Report the situation to police or someone you trust, she advised. That could be a family member, doctor, faith leader or social worker.

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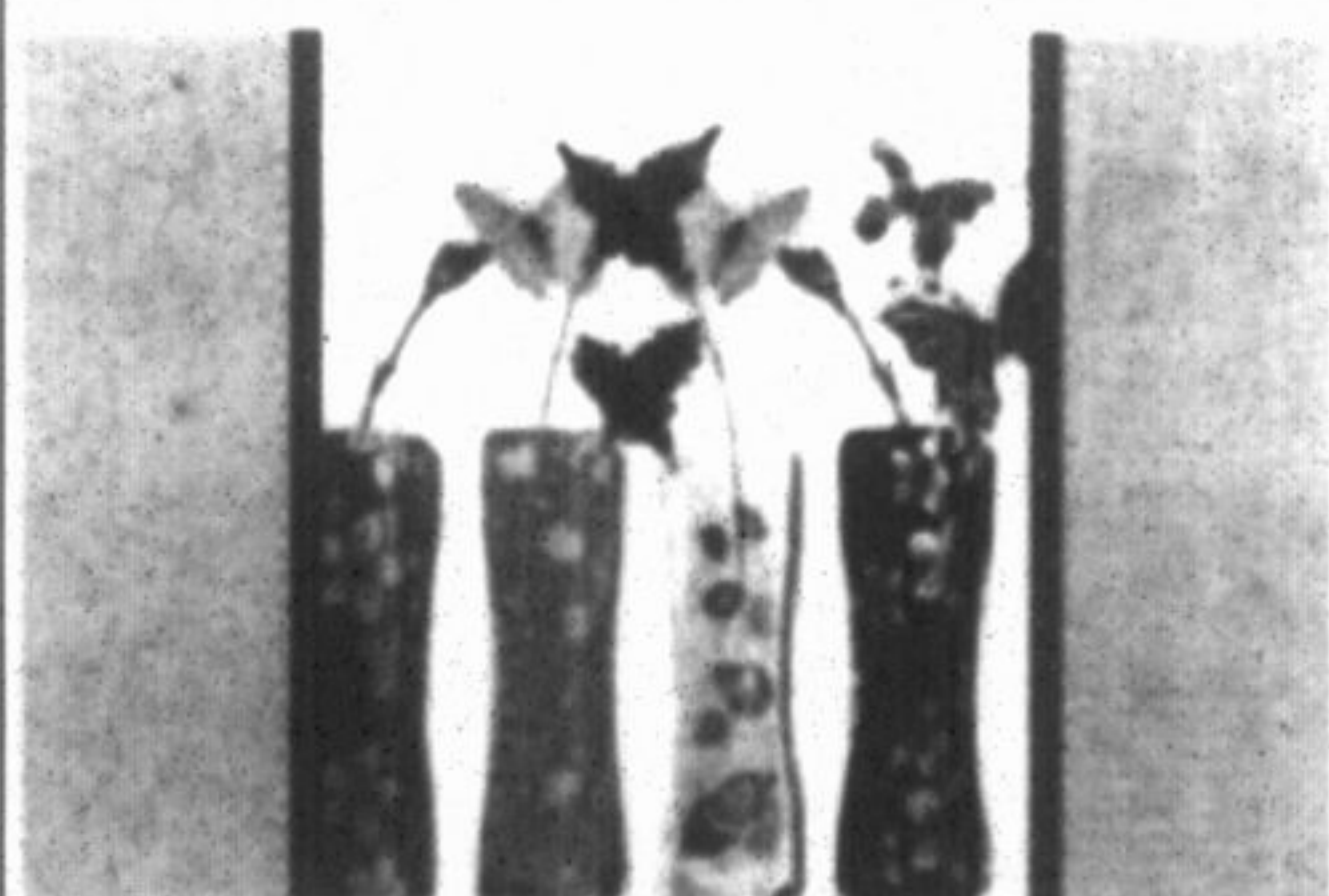


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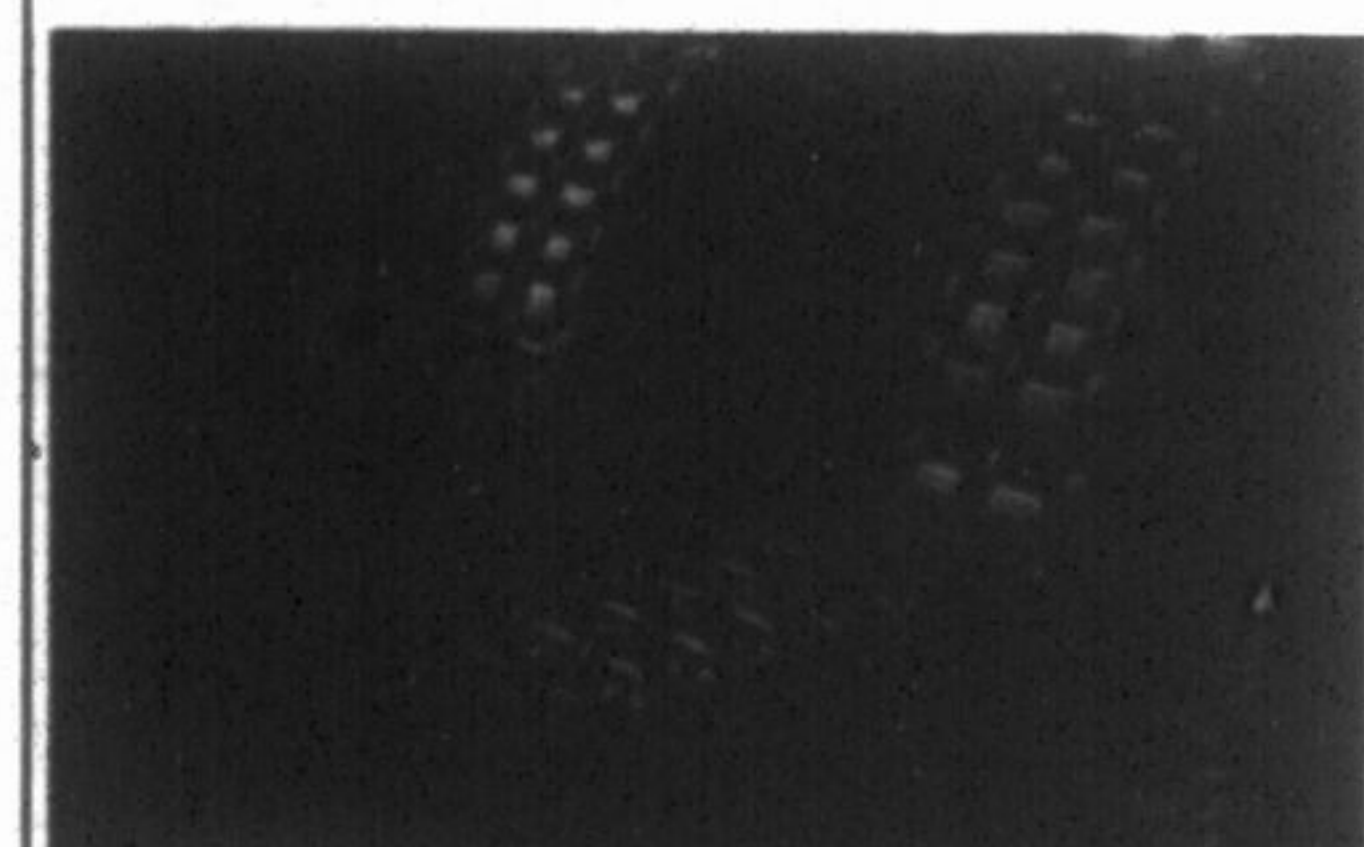
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