



Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

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*Réseau canadien pour la prévention des mauvais traitements envers  
les aîné(e)s*

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## Media and Senior Abuse Reports

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# Media and Senior Abuse Reports

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*"The media (e.g. newspapers, radio, television, cable companies) are important allies in promoting public education messages. The media can be helpful if older adults are portrayed positively and realistically and the issue of abuse and neglect is not "sensationalized."*

Source: Community Awareness and Response: Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults, 2001, D. Kinnon. <sup>(i)</sup>

## A. Introduction

Prevention and education on senior abuse issues in domestic and institutional settings have been the primary focus of communities in Canada. Public education and awareness consistently ranks very high in surveys on community needs. <sup>(ii)</sup> However, to a large extent, Canadian organizations have not systematically looked at the role the media can and should take in shaping public understanding and attitudes about abuse and neglect in later life. Some work has been done very recently in Alberta (2003) and in other jurisdictions such as the United States.

### 1. What Role Does the Media Play in Senior Abuse Prevention?

National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (NCPEA) has pointed out that

"the media can shape public perception about the problem, familiarize the public with available resources, educate policy makers about the problem and the need for effective services and policy, and encourage victims to come forward for help. It can also serve as a deterrent by warning perpetrators and potential abusers of the consequences of their actions."

## 2. How Can the Media Get Involved in Senior Abuse Prevention?

The NCPEA identified several potential roles. Media can

- Provide coverage of new developments in the field including new policy, research findings, and services
- Develop stories that highlight the extent and complexity of the problem.
- Help the public understand the role of community agencies and advocacy groups, the benefits and resources they offer, and the challenges they face in addressing the problem.
- Convey the message to victims that they are not alone, that nobody deserves to be abused, and that help is available.
- Inform victims and others about how to access services.
- Convey the message to the abusers, as well as those who may be considering harmful acts that abuse and neglect will not be tolerated, and they will be held accountable.

Media can also

- Help the public understand the roles of advocacy groups.
- Convey the message that some forms of abuse constitute a criminal offence and should be reported to local law enforcement.
- Help the public understand the role and responsibilities of government, and highlight the work being done to address the problem in domestic and institutional settings.
- Inform victims and others about the federal and provincial laws that protect adults in the community or in care from abuse.

Media can also play a role in helping politicians, government representatives and policymakers understand the various types of abuse or neglect, the complexity of some of the issues, and consequently the need for different kinds of resources to address the diverse situations.

## 3. Does Abuse of Older Adults Receive Sufficient Media Coverage?

In early 2003, the National Center on Elder Abuse in the United States began compiling media reports on abuse and neglect of older adults to get a sense of what was being reported, by whom and where. They compiled over 200 American news articles over five months. They found the issue is not well covered, but there is some coverage of the issue. Abuse of seniors is not invisible to the public. <sup>(iii)</sup> They conclude: "Overall, reporters are not doing a bad job of presenting elder and vulnerable adult abuse issues." They found that both domestic and institutional abuse news items were receiving coverage.

Here are some of their further observations:

- **Abuse of "vulnerable adults"** -- those with physical or mental disabilities and living in institutions, or with caregivers, and family members received a fair amount of media attention in the United States.
- **Self neglect was overlooked:** On the other hand, self-neglect was seldom covered (self neglect makes up the majority of Adult Protective Services cases in states whose mandate include it).
- **The focus is on crimes and "news":** The media is more likely to cover cases that involve a police action or the issuance of a government report. The summary notes "It's not uncommon for an institution, once it's been charged with abuse, to hit a reporter's radar screen again, and some papers do seem to take care to follow-up on domestic cases as they move through the criminal justice system."
- **Reports overlook available services:** Although some new articles mentioned the services that can be provided to seniors and vulnerable adults who are abuse victims, they very seldom gave much detail about what the services do. Phone numbers of agencies that victims can call were more likely to show up in articles on younger domestic violence victims than in articles on elder abuse.
- **Is the focus on the unusual?** Sexual assault of male nursing home residents showed up many times in American news items during the five months that the initial database covered. Is this because it is different from what the public expects?

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) offers [practical tips to journalists about misconceptions](#) to avoid when covering situations involving abuse in later life. <sup>(iv)</sup> These include common public assumptions such as "Abuse of older adults generally occurs on dark streets by strangers"; "No one would ever abuse an older person"; "Only rich/ poor older people are abused"; or "If we just pass a law, that will protect older adults and solve the problem of senior abuse." See: [www.elderabusecenter.org/default.cfm?p=pitfalls.cfm](http://www.elderabusecenter.org/default.cfm?p=pitfalls.cfm)

In reality, we know the majority of the harms to older adults come from family members or other people they know and trust; and that abuse knows no social or economic boundaries. The NCEA also points out that

"People who interact with older adults on all levels need to be aware of elder abuse. This may involve passing new laws or enforcing existing laws, training law enforcement and health professionals, and providing more resources for adult protective services." <sup>(v)</sup>

*"Be sure to carefully craft your message to ensure that it is clear, concise and reflects the true realities of the problem."*

*from "Community Awareness and Response"*

## B. Working with the Media?

### 1. Suggestions

Here are some suggestions compiled from advocacy groups. Journalists and television reporters are often pressed for time. There are several ways in which you can get your message across by making their job easier.

#### (a). When the media contact you:

- Return calls promptly.
- Be sensitive to their deadlines.
- Think before you speak.

(i). **Be ready.** In many cases, the media will want an immediate response from you to a particular crisis or news situation.

- Respond to calls quickly. Tomorrow is often too late.
- Have information readily available. Make sure it is accurate and credible. Just because something has been stated by others does not necessarily make it true.
- Build a community awareness kit or background sheet with basic local, regional or national figures that can be given to the media *if they want*.
- Regularly update your information.
- Have answers to common questions such as "How common is this?"; "Is it worse here?"; "Is it true that only a very small percentage of abuse cases are reported?"; "What should our community/ province be doing?"

(ii). **Know your key messages** about senior abuse or neglect that your group wants to get across. If you have a Board of Directors or Steering Committee, have them identify key positions ahead of time.

(iii). **Select a good spokesperson** to present your perspective. This should be someone who is comfortable talking with the media, is well informed on the issues, and can "think quickly on their feet".

(iv). **Don't just identify the problem.** The journalist or television reporter will likely want to know what can or should be done to address the issue. Have some "solutions" at hand.

- When a person is abused in the community or in an institution, the public will want to know what help is available. What services are accessible to victims?
- What ensures that perpetrators will be held accountable, e.g., when abuse occurs in an institution? What if the "perpetrator" is the administration of the facility?
- What should our community, province, or territory be doing?

(v). **Make your position informative and interesting.**

(vi). **Think about the language you use.** Some terms and phrases to describe abuse of older adults will be less patronizing than others. See [Ageism](#). This is important if you want to avoid perpetuating ageist language and attitudes. The language that you use, shapes the language that the media uses.

(vii) **Try to not overreact to the final article.** Recognize the fact that the reporter may not have control over the title of the article. Sometimes, your "sensitive responses" may become altered and sensationalized in the heading. [See below on follow-up]

**(b). When you contact the media:**

- Be concise.
- Accept that they're "always" busy.
- Leave a succinct and specific voice mail message.
- Give them enough lead time.
- Spoon feed them (give them a story that writes itself). 130 page reports are not useful to them. The executive summary may be.
- Use plain language.
  - Never patronize, but at the same time never assume that they have in-depth knowledge about your issue.
- Think before you speak.
  - Know in advance the points you want to make--stick to two or three points.
  - If it doesn't feel right--don't do it. Research the reporter or outlet, if necessary, before granting an interview.
- Follow-up
  - Thank the reporter if the story is even fairly good.

- Complain only if the story is factually wrong--and even then be professional--and remember that it's a reporter's job to get both sides of the issue.

## 2. "Can You Give Us a Real Abused Person?"

This is a difficult situation that many service providers and organizations working with abused or neglected older adults struggle with. Media often want "a real abused person" to make the story feel personal to their audience. Service providers are often very protective of the seniors they know have experienced abuse or neglect. Government agencies generally will not help the reporter locate an abused person, considering it a violation of privacy. Provincial and federal freedom of information and privacy laws may limit what government agency staff can say in certain circumstances.

For community service providers:

You may know of a senior who may be willing to speak openly. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Different seniors will respond differently to being asked if they would like to talk about their experience.
- Try not to be paternalistic and do not make assumptions about how the person *might respond*.
- Some will be very fearful or feel uncomfortable at the prospect of talking publicly. Respect their wishes.
- For others, the experience will be sufficiently in the past that they feel safe talking about it. In these situations, the person may want to help others learn about the problem and help people learn about the community resources so that they do not have to suffer the same problems in their lives.
- Never pressure a person, and always give them the opportunity to change their mind, even at the last moment.

For abuse or neglect situations occurring in institutions:

- The person receiving care is usually dependent on those providing care and may be fearful of being treated adversely because of speaking publicly. Family members or advocates may have similar concerns. Other family members are "willing to take the risk".
- Some family members are more open to speaking publicly when care is no longer at issue for that person (e.g. after the person's death or the individual has moved to another location).

For both abuse in the community and abuse in institutions, consider trying to have these discussions well in advance of a particular crisis, so that people are not under pressure.

There is one other important consideration for abuse and neglect in institutions. That is, "Is the situation which the person experienced likely to be understood by others as 'abuse' or 'neglect'?" Physical abuse (hitting, pulling hair, treated roughly) is one form of abuse that people may understand, and it may be the first that comes to mind for abuse in institutions. Systemic issues such as inadequate staffing and the cumulative effect of "little erosions of dignity" may not be readily apparent to the journalist, television reporter, or radio personality and therefore not apparent to the public as forms of "abuse" or "neglect".

You may want to "pre-screen" or work with the person who will be speaking on the issue if their situation does not fall into the typical public conception of abuse in institutions. Or in the alternative, offer the journalist or reporter background information so that they have a context for understanding why this situation is "abuse" or "neglect" and to understand the negative effect it has on the person living in an institutional setting.

### References and Useful Resources

(i) D. Kinnon. (2001). Community Awareness and Response: Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults. Health Canada, Family Violence Prevention Unit.

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/familyviolence/html/agecommuni\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/familyviolence/html/agecommuni_e.html) or PDF version  
[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/familyviolence/pdfs/agecommuni\\_e.pdf](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/familyviolence/pdfs/agecommuni_e.pdf)

(ii) See for example, PEI Centre on Health and Aging. Abuse of Older Adults. [A Report of Priorities for Prince Edward Island](#). December 2001. In the survey, 62% of respondents saw public education as a high need.

(iii) [www.wordbridges.net/elderabuse/AAR/Vol2Issue3/databasetellsus.html](http://www.wordbridges.net/elderabuse/AAR/Vol2Issue3/databasetellsus.html)

(iv) National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA). Reporting on Elder Abuse: Avoiding Pitfalls. [www.elderabusecenter.org/default.cfm?p=pitfalls.cfm](http://www.elderabusecenter.org/default.cfm?p=pitfalls.cfm)

(v) Ibid.

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National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse. The Media.
www.preventelderabuse.org/professionals/media.html

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**Nexus. Journalists Speak Out: Interview with members of the Journalists Exchange.** In this 1998 interview article, journalists describe how groups can convey key messages and information more effectively to the public on senior abuse through the use of the media.

[www.preventelderabuse.org/nexus/journalists.html](http://www.preventelderabuse.org/nexus/journalists.html)

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The US National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect offers a number of suggestions on "How to Involve the Media" in raising awareness of abuse issues. Although the information is on child abuse, many parts of the information are useful and easily transferable to raising awareness of abuse issues in later life.

Provides information includes how to's on: Develop a Press Release; Write an OpEd Piece; Submit Prewritten Articles to Community Newspapers; Secure Television and Radio Coverage; and Develop Public Service Announcements.

<http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/raising/media/index.cfm>

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### Elder Abuse Awareness Campaign Working Document

In 2003, Alberta looked at the type of communication activities required in the province to challenge attitudes that foster acceptance or tolerance of seniors. This document identifies the types of messages that need to be conveyed, the type of medium that would be needed, as well as some of the different needs/ issues for urban and rural audiences. At page 34, identifies some key ideas to convey to the media:

- "What we would like them to know" (avoid stereotyping aging)
- "What we would like them to do" (provide more positive images, inform public on senior abuse issues).

[www.child.gov.ab.ca/whatwedo/familyviolence/pdf/Elder%20Abuse%20Awareness%20Campaign%20Wkg.%20Doc.-Oct.%2003.pdf](http://www.child.gov.ab.ca/whatwedo/familyviolence/pdf/Elder%20Abuse%20Awareness%20Campaign%20Wkg.%20Doc.-Oct.%2003.pdf)

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Ontario Elder Abuse Strategy- Public Awareness Campaign

An overview of the Strategy's public education and awareness campaign, as well as ideas from other successful public education initiatives.

www.onpea.org/Strategy/Communication/PublicEducationAndAwareness.htm

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The Canadian Psychologists Association offers a number of suggestions to psychologists (but also useful to other service providers) on working with the media.

[www.cpa.ca/media.html](http://www.cpa.ca/media.html)