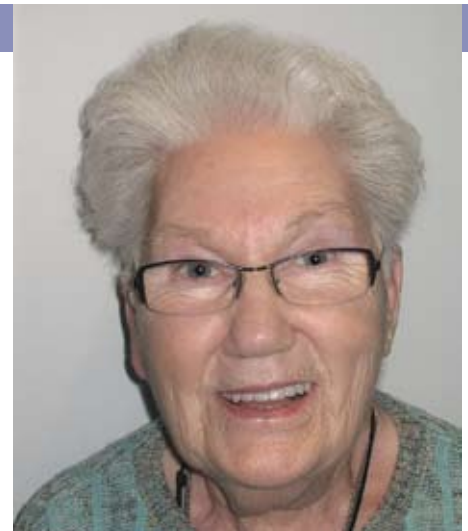


Jill Hightower

Abuse of Older People *and* What to Do about it!



The Rights of Older People

- The right to dignity, privacy, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness in old age
- The right to keep one's individuality
- The right to live independently
- The right to express personal feelings and subjective thoughts without inhibition
- The right to seek help and receive services
- The right to be stimulated by new experiences and ideas
- The right to safety and security at home and in public
- The right to a bright future

That is a summary and reminder by the BC Coalition to Eliminate Abuse of Seniors (BC CEAS) of the Principles adopted by the United Nations in 1991 and endorsed by most member governments, yet violence and abuse is a hidden reality for many older adults across the globe. In most countries, it is still hardly recognized and largely unreported.

We know that abuse of older adults may be physical, emotional, financial, or sexual. It also includes violation of rights and neglect.

Canada is among the countries where knowledge of and response to abuse is gradually improving. Like child abuse and domestic violence, abuse in later life is an issue of power and control. Research shows that older victims of abuse were often abused in early life.

We all hope to enjoy those UN Principles in our own older years. As a professional, you may become aware of clients who are perhaps being abused. You are in a position to offer information to them about sources for help.

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Financial abuse, probably the most common single form of abuse of older persons, often occurs in combination with other forms of abuse. A common misconception is that older adults who experience abuse are mentally incompetent. But, as noted by Laurie Salvador on page 44 of this issue, mental competence does not prevent abusive actions by a family member, spouse, child, or grandchild or by friends, neighbours, paid care providers, landlords, or any individual in a position of power, trust, or authority.

Laurie has provided graphic examples of financial abuse. Perhaps all experienced legal professionals have their own examples of situations that affront their sense of justice.

A conflict may come into play as you act in your client's best interest in suspected cases of abuse—the risk of offending your client vs. due respect for the adult's independence and his or her right to accept or reject help.

In my experience, older adults generally reject the term "abuse" in their own situation—a situation others would recognize as clearly abusive.

For example, a mother whose adult son often takes substantial sums of her money, which he never repays, may agree she has a problem, but she would not agree he abuses her. Those who work with victims of all types of abuse know how to get beyond such semantic problems.

Legal professionals are often in a unique position to identify abuse and provide information and support. When talking with the older person, privacy is essential. An expression of concern can lead to providing resource information, including police services. While the older person may be reluctant to discuss the topic, he or she will know that you are there.

Sometimes physical or mental disabilities interfere with the older adult's ability to self-determine. Of course, in a situation of vulnerability and abuse, using the reporting mechanism under the guardianship legislation is appropriate and may be an ethical obligation.

In BC, Part 3 of the *Adult Guardianship Act* defines "vulnerable

adult" and provides reporting mechanisms to help adults of all ages who are experiencing abuse or neglect and who cannot seek help on their own.

Most important, you can get involved without having to resolve the situation. The best help you can probably provide is connecting the person with community support services

What can we do here in BC—on an individual and professional level—to help address and prevent elder abuse?

Individually, we can educate ourselves on issues of abuse, familiarize ourselves with resources in our communities, and offer at least a friendly word of concern when appropriate.

As a concerned professional, you may consider contributing in other ways.

- Join a Community Response Network in your area. A CRN is a diverse group of concerned community members who come together to create a coordinated community response to adult abuse, neglect, and self-neglect.

- Support BC CEAS, a provincial organization working to prevent abuse of older adults. It has a Help line. In July of this year, BC CEAS is establishing a legal clinic.
- Ensure your waiting room displays posters and pamphlets provided by locally available services to abuse victims, in all languages appropriate to your clientele.
- When appropriate, refer clients to professionals who have earned the Certified Senior Advisor (CSA®) designation from the Canadian Academy of Senior Advisors (CASA).

Some strategies can help others and ourselves maintain our independence and protect ourselves from abuse as we age. Most important is staying socially connected and active and maintaining and renewing our networks of friends and acquaintances.

- If you have a partner, make sure you both are knowledgeable about

your financial affairs so that either of you could manage alone.

- Involve yourself in volunteer activities in your community.
- Review your Will periodically. Make changes to it only after careful consideration and/or discussion with a trusted family member, friend, or legal professional.
- Ask for help when you need it. Remember—you are special. Take time to do some of the things you have always wanted to do. It is never too late for new experiences.

These suggestions are from a list of hints for older adults that is available from www.canadacsa.com/featured_articles.html. ▲

Other sources mentioned in this article . . .

BC CEAS: BC Coalition to Eliminate Abuse of Seniors

Voice: **604 437-1940**

Toll Free **1-866- 437-1940**

www.bcceas.ca

CRN: BC Association of Community Resource Networks

Voice: **604 660-4482**

www.bccrns.ca/

CSA: Canadian Academy of Senior Advisors

Voice: **604 628-9471**

www.CanadaCsa.com

Public Guardian and Trustee of British Columbia

www.trustee.bc.ca

Part 3 Process

Voice: **604 660-4444**

www.trustee.bc.ca/pdfs/STA/abuseneglect.htm

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June 15 is World Elder Abuse Awareness Day.