



Elder abuse: Awareness and prevention.

Zinah Ismael, Laura Kaufman, Kadambari Rawal, Joseph Calabrese
Boston University Henry M. Goldman School of Dental Medicine



What is Elder Abuse?

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) defines elder abuse as "a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person".

Prevalence of Elder Abuse

- Approximately **1 in 6 individuals aged 60 and above** experienced abuse in community settings within the last year.
- **Global Impact:** Approximately **141 million people** aged 60 and older experience some form of abuse each year.
- **Financial Exploitation:** Elderly Americans lose nearly **\$36.5 billion** annually due to financial abuse.
- **Underreporting:** It's estimated that **only 1 in 24 cases** of elder abuse are reported to authorities.
- **Increased Rates:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of elder abuse in the community increased by as much as **84%**.



Case study: Clutter house.

Patient: Jane Doe, 84 years old, Blind

Presenting Complaint: Mrs. Doe's son called the dental office to request a home visit for his mother who had been experiencing a toothache and had difficulty getting to the dental clinic.

Observations:

• **Home Environment:** Narrow pathways were present between piles of belongings. Many unopened bottles of medication, some appearing to be over five years old were scattered throughout the living area. Cans of food were placed on a small table next to Mrs. Doe's head.



• **Patient Presentation:** Mrs. Doe was frail, and she appeared thin. During the examination, the dentist noticed several bruises on Mrs. Doe's arms.



Possible Elder Abuse Concerns:

- **Neglect:** The cluttered and unsanitary living conditions, potential malnutrition raise concerns about neglect.
- **Physical Abuse:** The presence of bruises on Mrs. Doe's arms is a potential indicator of physical abuse.
- **Dentist's Actions and Considerations:**
 - **Mandatory Reporting:** The dentist must be aware of their state's specific laws and reporting procedures.
 - **Further Assessment:** The dentist may need to ask Mrs. Doe questions in a present of impartial witness in a safe private setting to gather more information about her situation (Table 1,2)
 - **Reporting:** The dentist is obligated to report their suspicions to the appropriate authorities, such as Adult Protective Services.

Patient Interview Findings:

• Mrs. Doe stated that her son takes good care of her. She mentioned he bathes her, feeds her, administers her medications, and ensures she receives all necessary medical care.

Investigations and Discoveries:

• Mrs. Doe is on blood thinners, which, combined with her frail condition, causes her to bruise easily when handled. The bruises were determined to result from the physical process of her son assisting her, such as picking her up.

Actions Taken by the Dentist:

• Although Adult Protective Services was not contacted, the dentist consulted Mrs. Doe's geriatrician to confirm the findings and validate the explanation regarding her bruises. Details about Mrs. Doe's overall physical, home conditions, and conversation with geriatrician were documented in her dental notes for future reference.

Outcome of the Review:

• It was confirmed that Mrs. Doe has been in this state for years. Despite the concerning signs, all evidence indicates that her son provides diligent and attentive care.

Conclusion:

While there are red flags such as the living conditions and excessive clutter, the care provided by her son appears to prioritize her well-being. Despite initial concerns, no evidence of neglect or harm was found at this time.

Impact of Elder Abuse on Society

- **Mental Health Impact:** Survivors face increased depression rates and are **3X** more likely to experience premature death.
- **Economic Burden:** **\$5.3 billion** is spent annually on healthcare related to elder abuse.
- **Broader Effects:** It fosters social isolation and intersects with pressing public health issues, including the opioid crisis.

Factors that can lead to Elder Abuse



Ageism



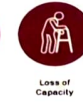
Intolerance
Impulse



Family history
of financial support
or domestic violence



Cohabitation

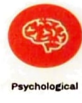


Loss of
Capacity

Forms of Elder Abuse



Financial



Psychological



Physical



Sexual



Neglect

Role of The Dentist

- 19 states specifically name "dentists" or "dental hygienists" as mandatory reporters. Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, Missouri, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia.
- The American Bar Association's Commission on Law and Aging has a state-by-state resource that summarizes state/territory laws, reporting timelines, and where to report suspicions of elder abuse.



- Report suspicions of elder abuse through a toll-free hotline or online reporting system immediately, although some states allow as long as 48 hours for reporting.

References

- [n.d.]. **Elder abuse.** NIH. World Health Organization: WHO (2024, June 15)
- **Adult or elder people WHO.**
- Russell SL, Fulmer T, Singh G, Valenti M, Vermula R, Strauss SM. Screening for elder mistreatment in a dental clinic population. J Elder Abuse Negl. 2012 Oct;24(4):326-39. doi: 10.1080/08945666.2012.661683. PMID: 23016728; PMCID: PMC3462354

SPOTTING THE SIGNS OF ELDER ABUSE

About 1 in 10 adults over age 60 are abused, neglected, or financially exploited.

physical mental

neglect financial sexual

Abuse can happen to any older person. It's a broad term. It can happen in a home, at a relative's home, or in an elder care facility.

Watch for these signs of abuse:

• Severe depression, confusion, or withdrawal

• Unexplained bruises, cuts, or injuries

• Has unexplained bruises, cuts, or injuries

• Appears dirty, unkempt, unhygienic, or in poor health

• Has had recent or other preventable conditions

• Recent changes in behavior or spending patterns

Talk with the older adult and then contact the local Adult Protective Services, Long Term Care Ombudsman, or the police.

Table 1

EASI Questions			
Q 1-5 ask of patient; Q 6 answered by doctor (within last 2 months)			
Q 1-5	YES	NO	Did not answer
1) Have you relied on people for any of the following: bathing, dressing, shopping, banking, or meals?	YES	NO	Did not answer
2) Has anyone prevented you from getting food, clothes, medications, glasses, hearing aids or medical care, or from being with people you wanted to be with?	YES	NO	Did not answer
3) Have you been upset because someone talked to you in a way that made you feel ashamed or threatened?	YES	NO	Did not answer
4) Has anyone tried to force you to sign papers or to use your money against your will?	YES	NO	Did not answer
5) Has anyone made you afraid, touched you in ways that you did not want, or hurt you physically?	YES	NO	Did not answer
6) Doctor: Elder abuse may be associated with findings such as poor eye contact, withdrawn nature, malnourishment, hygiene issues, cuts, bruises, inappropriate clothing, or medication compliance issues. Have you notice any of these today or in the last 12 months?	YES	NO	Not sure

Table 2

Q 1-5	YES	NO	Did not answer
1) Have you relied on people for any of the following: bathing, dressing, shopping, banking, or meals?	YES	NO	Did not answer
2) Has anyone prevented you from getting food, clothes, medications, glasses, hearing aids or medical care, or from being with people you wanted to be with?	YES	NO	Did not answer
3) Have you been upset because someone talked to you in a way that made you feel ashamed or threatened?	YES	NO	Did not answer
4) Has anyone tried to force you to sign papers or to use your money against your will?	YES	NO	Did not answer
5) Has anyone made you afraid, touched you in ways that you did not want, or hurt you physically?	YES	NO	Did not answer
6) Doctor: Elder abuse may be associated with findings such as poor eye contact, withdrawn nature, malnourishment, hygiene issues, cuts, bruises, inappropriate clothing, or medication compliance issues. Have you notice any of these today or in the last 12 months?	YES	NO	Not sure