

A Global Response to Elder Abuse and Neglect:

Building Primary Health Care Capacity to Deal
with the Problem Worldwide: Main Report



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1. The team consists of researchers Mark Yaffe (McGill University and St Mary’s Hospital Centre), Maxine Lithwick (CSSS René-Cassin) and Christina Wolfson (McGill University and Sir Mortimer B. Davis Jewish General Hospital).
2. A list of the research experts, evaluators and country coordinators can be found on pp. 33–34.

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Preface

United Nations estimates indicate that by 2025 the number of older people³ will double from the current 600 million to 1.2 billion. Of the one million people who reach their sixtieth birthday each month, 80% are in the developing world. Although the proportion of older people out of the total population is higher in developed countries, the percentage increase of the elderly population is much greater in the developing world (UN Population Division, 2004). Furthermore, rapid ageing in developing countries is taking place in the context of fast social change, such as urbanization, increased participation of women in the workplace, industrialization and prevailing poverty. Although elder abuse is not a new phenomenon, the speed of population ageing worldwide, in the context of such profound societal changes, inevitably will lead to an increase in its incidence and prevalence.

Until very recently, elder abuse, the mistreatment of older people, was a social problem hidden from public view and mostly regarded as a private matter. However, elder abuse is a manifestation of the timeless phenomenon of interpersonal violence. Child and partner (mainly female) abuse were the first to emerge and were both seen as mostly family (domestic) violence issues. Public awareness towards child abuse and violence against women gained prominence only once studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century provided evidence of their magnitude. As a consequence, interpersonal violence was then framed only within age-

specific compartments. Apart from other parameters that try to explain victimization in different population groups, ageing may trigger an additional risk of abuse due to the increased dependence on others, social isolation and frailty that accompany it. Moreover, older men and women come from generations that avoided discussing private issues. As a result, elder abuse continues to be a taboo, mostly underestimated and ignored by societies across the world.

Evidence is accumulating, however, to indicate that elder abuse, which includes the pervasive issue of neglect, is an important public health and societal problem that manifests itself in both developing and developed countries. As such, it demands a global orchestrated response. From a health and social perspective, unless the primary health care (PHC) and social services sectors are well equipped to identify and deal with the problem, elder abuse will continue to be underdiagnosed and overlooked.

WHO/ALC and CIG-UNIGE, with partners from all continents, conducted this study in order to develop a strategy to prevent elder abuse within the PHC context. The study consisted of a qualitative research project in eight participating countries focused on testing questions originally devised by researchers in Montreal. These questions were aimed at raising awareness among PHC professionals of the issue of elder abuse.

3. Throughout this text “older people” are generally defined as people who are over 65 years old, but in this definition here “older people” are defined as those over 60 years old.

Abbreviations

ALC	Ageing and Life Course Programme/World Health Organization
CIG	Center for Interdisciplinary Gerontology
CSSS	Centre de Santé et de Services Sociaux
EASI	Elder Abuse Suspicion Index
GIAN	Geneva International Academic Network
GIDS	Graduate Institute of Development Studies
GIIS	Graduate Institute of International Studies
HAI	HelpAge International
HUG	Hôpitaux Universitaires de Genève (University Hospital of Geneva)
IMSERSO	Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour (Spain)
INPEA	International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse
MIPAA	Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing
NGO	nongovernmental organization
PAHO	Pan-American Health Organization
PHC	primary health care
Poliger	Policlinique de Gériatrie des Hôpitaux Universitaires de Genève

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