
Guest Editorial

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Abusing the abused? The double whammy of elder abuse and neglect

Being asked to write the guest editorial for this edition of the *Social Work Review* has provided me with the ideal opportunity to ask why social work, in an ageing society, is all but voiceless when it comes to the issue of 'elder abuse and neglect'? This lack of voice might imply that social work has adopted the 'culture of ageism' (Bytheway, 1997, cited in Victor, 2006) which appears to pervade Aotearoa New Zealand. Evidence of such a culture is not difficult to find, as a sample of headlines appearing in the *Christchurch Press* testifies. Headlines which include: "Elderly push working age patients off list" (*The Press*, 22.8.06: A4), "Surgery age bias illegal" (*The Press*, 23.8.06: A7), "Some doctors refuse to treat elderly patients" (*The Press*, 18.11.06: A8), all point to ageism being alive and well in the 21st century. None of these articles generated more than a ripple of concern. An air of silence prevailed.

If it is that social work's silence reflects society's lack of interest in issues of later life, then one must consider the possibility that ageism might also influence the way social workers, as members of society, think, talk and work with older people including those experiencing mistreatment. I also wonder if these ageist assumptions have contributed to the 'expert' led problem-focused (McPhee and Bronstien, 2002) social work approach common in elder abuse and neglect work. As social workers we are obliged to critically examine services for older people in general and those designed, developed, organised and delivered to address elder abuse and neglect in particular. This examination needs to explore if and how ageism, consciously or unconsciously, underscores social work practice.

I am not suggesting that there has been a deliberate and calculated ageist response from social work to the phenomenon of elder abuse and neglect. All attempts to design services have been driven by a commitment to support and empower older people in situations of ill treatment. However, when the typical interventions in elder abuse and neglect cases are reviewed, it is clear that outcomes for older people have tended towards their removal and placement in institutional care, either long term or short term, through services such as carer support, day care and/or respite care. I suggest these interventions sit well within the context of western society's view of 'old', depicted as a time of frailty, senility and dependency. Such interventions have emerged from an inherent belief in the problematic nature of old age and the difficulties associated with caring for an older person. Understandings which have led to the adoption of these types of interventions are based on these generalised myths of 'old' age which are clearly evident in the literature – the primary focus of which have been biological/physiological and familial relationship explanations. I believe that these explanations are problematic because rather than dispelling the prevailing 'myths' associated with old age, these theories may serve to reinforce them by suggesting that older people are both the victims and cause of elder abuse and neglect because, old is difficult. Thus one could argue that these interventions 'abuse the abused' – resulting in a 'double whammy' for older adults.

Evidence indicates that there are few 'myth busting' social workers in the elder abuse and neglect debate. Consider for a moment social work with older people – traditionally not the 'first choice' social work career path for most graduates. Further, it does not appear to be a preferred focus for social work research and publication. A quick scan of the *Social Work Review* since 2000 reveals only four articles published on any topic relating to social work and older people. One must wonder at this apparent apathy when we consider the profession's commitment to working with people, valuing difference and advocating for social justice. Given that the over 65s are the fastest growing cohort(s) in Aotearoa New Zealand, the critical voice of social work examining and debating the issue of elder abuse and neglect is deafeningly silent.

This silence clearly mirrors the hush of society, and has led me to ponder a number of points:

- Does ageism in our society render the issue of elder abuse and neglect less visible to both the public and the profession?
- Why is it that the phenomenon of elder abuse and neglect only occasionally floats into the public stream of thought and then just as rapidly disappears from view?
- When it is raised, why does elder abuse and neglect trigger only small, infrequent ripples in a society where other forms of violence – particularly child abuse and domestic violence – produce waves of anxiety?

Having pondered, I conclude that:

- 1) Social work's lack of voice on elder abuse and neglect is likely to be symptomatic of western society's view of old age and
- 2) Any understanding of elder abuse and neglect can not be complete unless an ageist paradigm is fully considered.

It is important to acknowledge that some have attempted to get elder abuse and neglect on the agenda with some, albeit, limited success. For the last 30 years professionals, including social workers, have sought to understand and respond to the complex phenomenon known as elder abuse and neglect, the meaning(s) of which rest on society's beliefs about 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviour (Hudson and Carlson, 1994), and on the meaning of old age. Responses to elder abuse and neglect have largely been driven by practitioners and policy makers (Harbison and Morrow, 1998; Pain, 1999), and have resulted in the creation of policy documents and practice guidelines (Pritchard, 1999; Age Concern New Zealand, 1994) that have directed the work of social workers. These documents have quantified elder abuse and neglect, identifying, classifying and describing risk factors and characteristics (Pillemer and Wolf, 1986; Pain, 1999; Fallon, 2006). In so doing these documents have informed practitioners that elder abuse and neglect is knowable, detectable, and able to be ordered and managed – thus they seem to offer a degree of certainty and predictability. This model of procedural practice suggests that strict adherence to guidelines and policies will ensure the needs of older people are listened to and their rights protected (Pritchard, 1999). If one accepts this argument then one must also accept that anyone can undertake elder protection work if they are technically and procedurally competent. Some have even argued that social workers are not essential in this domain. To a large extent this positivist approach has met the needs of the organisations in which elder abuse and neglect work is undertaken, and where the drive for efficiency and accountability sits comfortably alongside the desire for order and expedience. As social workers we need to be challenging this simplistic notion

because we know and work with the complexities of the human condition in which certainty and predictability does not exist. The question should be not how efficiently does this approach work but how well does it meet the needs of older people in need of protection?

Attention to both procedural rigor and quantification has been significant in the practiced responses of elder abuse and neglect, while academically elder abuse and neglect has most often been theorised from micro perspectives. Discourse of stress on, and non-coping of, carers, alongside intrapersonal/interpersonal conflict, dominate the literature. These discourse, predicated on age, argue that elder abuse and neglect is a direct result of the factors associated with the ageing process. This is an ageist standpoint. Only a few authors (Pain, 1999; Harbison and Morrow, 1998) draw attention to the structural, political, cultural and social arrangements which influence the individual's experience of ageing including any experience of elder abuse and neglect. This creates a significant gap in our understanding of, and therefore our ability to respond to, this social phenomenon.

The reality is that there is no simple formula to be followed. Any simplistic rule-following and procedural-based interventions which are placed alongside limited and narrow theorisation, can suggest elder abuse and neglect work can be undertaken in an unthinking, uncritical, 'one size fits all' way. It is time for social work to challenge these dominant practices and discourse by acknowledging that old and responses to elder abuse and neglect are intertwined within the social, political, cultural and economic fabric of society. Social work as a humanitarian enterprise must lead the way in generating the debate and asking the hard questions:

- How does our society position older people?
- What is our way of knowing old and elder abuse and neglect?
- What impact does this positioning and knowledge have on older people who are mistreated?
- What are the consequences of this way of knowing, for the conceptualisation, organisation and delivery of elder abuse and neglect services?

It is past time for social work to step up and generate such a debate. If we do not do so, by critically theorising elder abuse and neglect as a social phenomenon which is linked to the experiences older people have of ageing in Aotearoa New Zealand, then we may well contribute to the perpetuation of both elder abuse and neglect and the culture of ageism on which responses to elder abuse and neglect are built.

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