Elder Abuse, Older Women and Considerations of Mental Health

Bridget Penhale

Summary

In recent years there has been an increased emphasis on violence and abuse within society and in particular the abuse and neglect of older people. It therefore seems appropriate to consider the potential role that issues related to violence, gender and mental health might contribute towards providing a greater understanding of the linked phenomena of elder abuse and neglect. This chapter aims to provide a brief overview of current knowledge about elder abuse and neglect and a consideration of factors from the fields of gender (in particular relating to older women) and mental health which might assist in the development of both knowledge and understanding of elder abuse and abusive situations.

1 Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been a gradual increase throughout the world of concern about the abuse and neglect of elderly people. The principal focus of concern has been on abuse of elders by their carers in the domestic setting although more recently there has been a move towards consideration of abuse occurring within institutional settings.

Elder abuse is not a new phenomenon (Stearns 1986), but it is effectively only since 1988 that the problem has really begun to be explored in the United Kingdom (UK). In many respects, it is still quite early in the stages of problem identification and the development of positive action to combat elder abuse and neglect is only just beginning to happen. Whilst a number of Western European countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands and France similarly recognised the existence of abuse at about the same time as the UK, there are others such as Spain, Italy and Belgium where the existence of abuse has only been acknowledged in recent years. Others still (Iceland, Czech Republic, Slovenia) are only now beginning to consider issues relating to elder abuse. There are yet other
countries (Denmark and some of the accession countries) that do not really appear to have recognised elder abuse up until this time.

2 What is Known about Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse and neglect is a complex and sensitive area to investigate adequately. This also appeared to be the case with both child abuse and domestic violence against younger women by men known to them. For example, comparative and developmental norms are much more difficult to establish for older people than with children who have been abused (Bennett et al, 1997). Additionally, there have been real difficulties in trying to determine a sound theoretical base to the phenomena. This is in part because of the lack of agreement concerning a standard definition of abuse, but also due to problems in researching the topic (see for example Bennett and Kingston 1993; Ogg and Munn-Giddings 1993). For instance, many of the research studies that have been carried out consist of very small-scale samples and have tended to concentrate on cases already known by professionals. This means that there are a number of difficulties in attempts to establish the exact nature of the field of enquiry.

Although English doctors identified the phenomena in the mid 1970s, it was not until the mid 1980s that the issue was really picked up on in the UK. By contrast, in the USA the issue was identified from the mid 1970s and was researched from that time in attempts to clarify the problem and to provide solutions to it. It is not entirely appropriate to draw generalisations from results of surveys in the USA, due to problems with definitions and with the research data (Cloke, 1983). However, in order to give some idea as to the potential magnitude of the problem, it is worth noting that the majority of research results emanating from the US originally suggested that somewhere between 4-10% of the elderly population were either at risk of, or were experiencing, abuse from their caregivers (Gioglio and Blakemore, 1985; Pillemer and Finkelhor, 1988; US House of Representatives, 1981). Most US researchers nowadays accept that somewhere in the region of 4-5% of the population of older people are potentially affected by abuse or neglect (Lachs and Pillemer, 1995).

3 Definitions

Despite the difficulties already mentioned a number of definitions of elder abuse have emerged. The usual types of abuse included within most definitions were: physical, psychological, financial and neglect. To this list have been added sexu-