Alone and Lonely: A Case Report on Elder Abuse in Malaysia

To the Editor:

While interviewing the elderly residing in a rural district in Malaysia in the course of a study on elder abuse and neglect, I came across an 85-year-old elderly gentleman, a widower, residing on his own in isolation. This was after being made to feel unwanted and unappreciated by his family members, in addition to suffering an episode of physical assault by his 16-year-old granddaughter. He spent his time watching television and reading newspapers throughout the day. Occasionally, a neighbor would look in on him with a kind word. The son is trying to fulfill his filial responsibilities without having to place his father in a home for the elderly. The elderly man knows his son is trying to balance his time between his family and his father, and locks him in at times for his own safety. The elderly gentleman feels that by asking for help or reporting his circumstances, he would be bringing shame to his family rather than upholding the family honor.

This case fits the description of psychological abuse, physical abuse, and neglect. In addition, the elderly man is at risk of depression and social isolation in addition to suffering from poor physical and mental well-being. Individuals and communities in our society need to be sensitized to the issue of elder abuse and neglect. Perhaps then neighbors and the community at large would be able to play a larger role in protecting elders rather than worry about minding their own business, and not expect health and welfare authorities to shoulder the responsibility. This is a classic case to show that without the element of violence, people are fairly tolerant of abuse of an elder.1

The many forms of abuse go unrecognized without physical abuse coming into play, and it is time that psychological abuse, neglect, financial, and sexual abuse of the elderly are recognized too, besides mandatory reporting and criminalizing of elder abuse.2,3 Counseling or other similar conflict resolution interventions are sometimes viewed with suspicion among the community, as people are afraid of “losing face,” a concept akin to airing their dirty laundry in public.4

If institutionalization of an elder is not shunned upon so much by Asian society, perhaps those who are in need of such placement would be able to get the help they need rather than suffer in silence. In this case, this would perhaps be a last resort, seeing that the old man has a dutiful son who cares about his well-being, yet is unable to integrate him with his wife, children, and in-laws, with whom he resides. The Asian mind is quick to judge and brand family members as being disrespectful or unfilial toward their elders if they do not reside with them or attend to their daily needs.5 Children or caregivers of elders have to balance fulfilling filial obligations, yet for those who are in need, placing elders in institutions to obtain the help and care they need is considered unacceptable in society. Thus, the caregiver and by extension, family, is struggling to manage an elder. Furthermore, long-term care for older adults is still lacking, where public institutions for elderly are few and are largely intended for the destitute.

Without awareness on elder abuse and education on avenues available to help elders, elders are likely to suffer in silence. This example here fits the World Health Organization’s definition of elder abuse: “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.”6 It is hoped that highlighting the plight of abused elders would sensitize individuals, healthcare, and social workers.

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