Elder abuse: A subject many don’t want to talk about

Elder abuse happens and too many seniors are hurt as a result. Photos: The Star/Azhar Mahfof

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He was recently diagnosed with depression and dementia, but his well-being deteriorated rapidly because he has been mistreated at home.

The verbal and emotional abuse started four years ago.

After Bernard lost his wife, his son and family moved in with him. Bernard thought their company would be good in his golden years.

He didn’t expect to be bullied.

It was his house but Bernard was made to feel like he was invading “their” space. He was yelled at for every little thing: forgetting to turn the TV off, not folding his towel or even watching “too much” television. He was accused of being a “burden” even though most of his pension went towards household expenses, called a “nuisance” and was constantly belittled.

All this began to eat away at Bernard. Bit by bit, he became withdrawn and depressed. He stopped going for his walks.

A concerned neighbour alerted the police and two officers came to check on him in his house in Labu, Johor. After assessing the situation, one of them discreetly advised Bernard to file a report of abuse.

For the first time, Bernard felt he could do something about his situation. He called his daughter who lived in Kuala Lumpur and they went to the police station where Bernard shared about the abuse he’d been suffering.

The police said they’d help him get a protection order from the courts. But at the last minute, Bernard backed down.

“He is my son. I don’t know why he is like this but he’s my son,” Bernard told his daughter. He also refused to move in with her because he didn’t want to leave his own house.

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It’s hard to measure, but if an elderly person is yelled at repeatedly and it bears a negative impact, then it is abuse or mistreatment,” says Universiti Malaya’s Department of Social and Preventive Medicine lecturer Assoc Prof Dr Noran Naqiah Hairi. She is leading an ongoing study – called the Prevent Elder Abuse and Neglect Initiative (Peace) – with her colleague Dr Clare Choo.

The other researchers on this project are Assoc Prof Dr Farizah Hairi, Assoc Prof Dr Sajaratulnisah and Assoc Prof Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin.

According to the Women, Family and Community Development ministry, only 23 cases of elder abuse were reported in the past three years. However, the Peace study has revealed that the problem is much more widespread.

In a survey on urban poor communities in Kuala Lumpur, Universiti Malaya researchers discovered that one in 10 individuals over the age of 60 have experienced one or more forms of abuse in the last 12 months. Another survey in a rural community in Kuala Pilah, Negri Sembilan showed a slightly lower figure: one in 20 elderly individuals reported abuse by caregivers or families.

“These figures corroborate the prevalence rate in other Asian countries. Very little is known about elder abuse and neglect here in Malaysia as most people don’t talk about it. But we need local data as the number and proportions of older people in Malaysia are increasing rapidly. We need to respond to the issues of this group, such as elder abuse,” says Dr Noran.

The Peace study is funded by Universiti Malaya’s Grand Challenge programme and aims to not only measure the incidence of elder abuse but determine its risk factors and consequences, and formulate strategies to deal with the issue.
The elderly patient assured the doctors and Suriani that her neighbours would take care of her and make sure she eats and takes her medications.

“So, we contacted her neighbours and paid them a visit to assess the situation. Amazingly, they all said that they would take turns to visit and care for the old lady. They said they would draw up a roster of duties such as changing her diapers and making sure she has food to eat. The entire community – elderly people and their children and grandchildren – all chipped in to help,” relates Suriani.

It is a heartwarming story. However, the medical social worker points out that such community support is more common in rural communities, and not in urban areas.

Deputy Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Paduka Chew Mei Fun says the ministry has activity centres for older persons (Pusat Aktiviti Warga Emas or Pawe) around the country, which are daycare centres for senior citizens, where they can participate in programmes or simply meet up with their peers.

There are 45 Pawes around the country, with five more expected to be ready soon.

“According to our figures, more than 31,000 elderly individuals are using these activity centres. The centres help them keep active and ensure they are not isolated. They form bonds and look out for each other. If someone doesn’t show up for a few days, the others will notice and alert the centre administrator who will then check on the welfare of the missing elderly,” she says in a recent interview.

The ministry also extends home help services, engaging volunteers to provide support services to the elderly, particularly those who live alone. So far, some 5,000 elderly individuals have access to the home help.
We currently have 20 geriatricians in the country. Singapore has a much smaller population and they have about 100. In many countries, geriatrics has become one of the largest (area of) specialisation as they know they are dealing with an aging population. We need to catch up,” he says.

State protection

The country also needs to re-examine its laws to ensure the elderly are not vulnerable to abuse.

Thus far, the assumption is that the elderly will be well cared for in their golden years because filial piety is a trait most Malaysians are brought up with.

It is, however, not a value everyone subscribes to. The hard reality is that government health and social services must play their roles in protecting the elderly from abuse or mistreatment. Presently, there are no specific laws to ensure elderly care, what more protect the elderly from abuse. The welfare of elders come under the purview of the Penal code and the Domestic Violence Act.

Doctors, social workers and other frontline responders now do not have clear guidelines on handling elder abuse.

“We found that most primary care doctors and nurses have had no training on handling elder abuse cases and rely on the guidelines that we have on child protection. Without any clear guidelines when it comes to elder abuse, most said they were just guessing and didn’t know what they should do,” shared Dr Noran, adding that they have so far trained 150 doctors and 350 nurses in Negri Sembilan to deal with elder abuse.

Dr Rajbans concurs, pointing out instances when social workers wanted to remove the elderly from abusive situations, only to have their actions questioned and opposed.

Consultant Geriatrician Dr Rajbans Singh says that often times, else abuse occurs not because the carers or family intentionally want to hurt or harm the older person but because they do not know how to care for the elderly.
Aging society is our reality. Everyone is busy with their careers or living abroad. We have to think of putting in place support services – community nursing homes and daycare centres, community nurses and so on. “It’s not too late, but we have to act quick,” he says.
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1 COMMENT

fezailah  March 11, 2016 at 1:26 pm
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People forget that they too will grow old. Cause if everyone remembers, than everyone will treat everyone with fairness. Even in the work place. All the work goes to the juniors because of the perception that they are strong which is true. But the seniors are left sitting in the office with the perception that they are weak but not all of them are. So just who is bullying whom? The boss is bullying the juniors physically and is bullying the seniors psychologically. So the senior has to stand