

THE ELDERLY AS VICTIMS OF VIOLENT CRIME: A REPORT OF TWO CASES

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Abstract:

Elderly people are susceptible populace for violent crime or abuse and neglect. About 7% of India's population are composed of elder persons and with improvements in socioeconomic conditions and increasing life expectancy, it is expected that this group may increase further. This increase of elder population has expanded a potential group of crime victims who are vulnerable to violence. The present case report summarizes two cases of elder homicides and addresses the issue. Some measures are also suggested to prevent the violence and death within this vulnerable population.

Key words:

Elder, homicide, elder care.

Introduction:

The elderly are susceptible populace for violent crime or abuse and neglect. The crime may be in form of physical abuse, mental anguish, financial distress or social isolation and even death. Elder abuse and neglect refers to an act of omission resulting in harm, including death, or threatened harm to the health or welfare of an elderly person (1). The increasing urbanization, industrialization and changing social, cultural and moral values made the contemporary people more mechanical. The dwindling of joint family, the rise of dual-career families and a possible shift in filial piety values (2) leads to apathy and lack of attention towards the elderly, the beloved ones who had nurtured and nourished. The frailty and social isolation that comes with illness or advanced age renders the elderly more vulnerable to violence (3). The research and literature of elder homicide are lacking in context to India. Herein we are reporting two case reports of elderly homicides, summarize the circumstances that surround these homicides and discuss the measures for prevention of abuse and death within this vulnerable population.

Case reports:

Case number 1:

A 78-year male, retired education officer was brought for autopsy. The elder was assaulted on July 25, at about 11 PM. He was living in bungalow with his old wife and

was isolated from neighbors. Autopsy showed features of asphyxial death in form of ligature strangulation. Subsequent investigation by Police revealed that the elder was assaulted for robbery and the previous worker employed had given information to a group of assailants regarding the elder.

Case number 2:

An 82 year retired superintendent engineer was brought for autopsy. The elder was assaulted on August 22, at around 10 PM by a female worker and her brother. Autopsy showed features of smothering. Subsequent Police investigation revealed that a pillow was used to smother the individual. The intention for the violence was robbery. The elder was living alone in apartment and his social contact was negligible.

Discussion:

About 7% of India's population are composed of elder people' (2). Moreover, with constant improvements in socioeconomic conditions and increasing life expectancy, the people are living longer (3). The substantial increase of elder population has expanded a potential group of crime victims who are both vulnerable to attack and likely to be severely injured as a consequence. In fact, violent assaults account for up to 14% of elder trauma patients and result in death more frequently than in younger patients. Combined illness also contributes to this greater mortality rate in the elderly (4). In present cases, both the individuals are retired persons with their children living either at other cities or abroad, away from them. Lonely living elderly are the soft targets of violence and victims of homicide. The common intention in both cases was robbery, especially robbery in home (3,4). The workers employed by the elders planned the assault. It means that the perpetrators know the victims. Although most elders feel secure in their homes, this is where the large majority of incidents occurred (3,4). In both cases, the death was due to violent asphyxia. Interestingly, the victims belong from sound financial background.

After occurrence of this incidence, Nagpur Police had taken an initiative and started a helpline for senior citizens. The police had came up with an idea to enroll all the elders residing lonely in the police station of respective area. Moreover, it was decided that police would visit to the homes at least twice a day during patrolling. But except few, majority had taken no pains to register themselves. Furthermore, the Police had also requested to furnish the information, address and a photograph of the workers employed at the service of the elder. However, till date, the scheme is on papers due to poor response from the persons for whom the scheme is meant.

As a society with an increasing percentage of elder, we can only expect this vulnerable group to be potential victims of violence (4). However, when analyzing violent deaths and attempting to prevent them, a collaborative effort must be undertaken. This involves active initiation from the society and law enforcement agencies. Similarly social interaction from the elder one should be increased and encouraged particularly with the neighbors. Fostering more neighborhood spirit would enhance security. It will help in timely care of the elderly. Moreover, social organization may be involved and encouraged to adopt one or more elders or they may act as a caretaker. It may also be

possible that the elder may take shelter at home for aged or nursing homes. However, as in pervious report, these homes are also not considered safe (5). A lot of regular service providers like gas cylinder provider, vegetable vender, milkman, newspaperman etc know about older people living alone. Some of them can use the knowledge to take advantage of the situation. It is better if the elders would hire home services to take care of the things involving vendors' etc and might reduce the risk. A greater role is envisaged for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) than the state in the case of elderly, particularly in providing support services to family caregiver (2).

Violent crime affect life and safety of people. Such crimes induce a sense of insecurity and fear amongst the community, particularly in the elders. The forensic pathologist has a greater role in ascertaining the patterns of violence in the emerging and developing branch of geriatric forensic medicine and contributes in formulation of policies for prevention of violence against this vulnerable group. Thus helping in establishing the health of society.

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