

Older people's risk of abuse is rising. Can an ad campaign protect them?

July 25 2024, by Joseph Ibrahim



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Elder abuse is an emerging public health and safety issue for communities of high-income countries.

The most recent data from Australia's [National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study](#), which surveyed 7,000 older people living in the community, found 1 in 6 self-reported being a victim of some form of abuse. But this did not include older people living in [residential aged care](#) or those with [cognitive impairment](#), such as dementia—so it is likely an underestimate.

This week the Australian government [announced](#) a multi-million dollar advertising campaign it hopes will address this serious and abhorrent abuse.

But is investing in community awareness of [elder abuse](#) the best use of scarce resources?

What is elder abuse?

The World Health Organization (WHO) [defines](#) elder abuse as "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."

Australia usually defines older people as those over 65. The exact age varies between countries depending on the overall health status of a nation and its vulnerable population groups. The WHO definition of an older adult for sub-Saharan Africa, for example, is over 50. And there are communities with poorer health status and shorter lifespans within country borders, including our First Nations people.

Elder abuse can take on [many different forms](#) including physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, or financial abuse and neglect.

Living longer and wealthier

The number of older people in our society is greater than it has ever been. Around [17% of Australians](#) are aged 65 and over. By 2071, older Australians will make up between 25% and 27% of the total population.

People are living longer, accumulating substantial wealth and are vulnerable to abuse due to cognitive, physical or functional limitations.

Longer [lifespans](#) increase the time of possible exposure to abuse. Australian men aged 65 can expect to live another 20.2 years, while women aged 65 are likely to live another 22.8 years. (Life expectancy for First Nations men and women remains significantly shorter.)

Australian men are [now 143 times more likely](#) to reach the age of 100 than they were in 1901. Women are 82 times more likely.

Older people hold a large proportion of our nation's wealth, making them vulnerable to financial abuse. Recent [research](#) by the Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney reveals older households (with people over 65) are 25% wealthier than the average middle-aged household and almost four times as wealthy as the average under-35 household.

Finally, older people have higher levels of impairment in their thinking, reasoning and physical function. Cognitive impairment, especially dementia, [increases](#) from one in 67 Australians under 60 to almost one in two people aged over 90.

Over half of Australians aged 65 years and over [have disabilities](#). A particularly vulnerable group are the 258,374 older Australians who receive [government-funded home care](#).

Who perpetrates elder abuse?

Sadly, most of the perpetrators of elder abuse are [known to their victims](#). They are usually a [member of the family](#), such as a life partner, child or grandchild.

Elder abuse causes significant [illness and even early death](#). [Financial abuse \(across all ages\)](#) costs the community billions of dollars. Specific data for financial elder abuse [is limited](#) but indicates massive costs to individual survivors and the community.

Despite this, the level of awareness of elder abuse is likely to be much lower than for family violence or child abuse. This is partly due to the comparatively recent [concept of elder abuse](#), with [global awareness campaigns](#) only developed over the past two decades.

Is an advertising campaign the answer?

The federal government has allocated A\$4.8 million to an advertising campaign on television, online and in health-care clinics to reach the broader community. For context, last year the government spent [\\$131.4 million](#) on all media campaigns, including \$32.6 million on the COVID vaccination program, \$2 million on Japanese encephalitis and \$3.2 million on hearing health awareness.

The campaign will likely benefit a small number of people who may be victims and have the capacity to report their perpetrators to authorities. It will generate some heartbreaking anecdotes. But it is unlikely to achieve broad community or systemic change.

There is little research evidence to show media campaigns alter the behavior of perpetrators of elder abuse. And suggesting the campaign raises awareness of the issue for older people who are survivors of abuse sounds more like blaming victims than empowering them.

We don't know how the government will judge the success of the campaign, so taxpayers won't know whether a reasonable return on this investment was achieved. There may also be opportunity costs associated with the initiative—that is, lost opportunities for other actions and strategies. It could be more effective and efficient to target high-risk subgroups or to allocate funding to policy, practice reform or research that has direct tangible benefits for survivors.

But the campaign can't hurt, right?

Actually, the dangers that could come with an [advertising campaign](#) are two-fold.

First, it may well oversimplify a highly complex issue. Identifying and managing elder abuse requires an understanding of the person's vulnerabilities, their decision-making capacity and ability to consent, the will and preferences of the victim and the role of the perpetrator in the older person's life. Abuse happens in the context of family and social networks. And reporting abuse can have consequences for the victim's quality of life and care.

Consider the complexities of a case where an older person declines to have her grandson reported to police for stealing her money and medication because of her fear of becoming socially isolated. She might even feel responsible for the behavior, having raised the grandson and not want him to have a criminal record.

Second, a public campaign can create the illusion that government and our institutions have the matter "in hand." This might slow the opportunity for real change.

Ideally, the campaign will strengthen the argument for better policies, reporting procedures, policing, prosecution and judgments that are

aligned. But these ends will also need investment in more research to build better communities that take good care of older people.

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