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### Elder abuse is a crime

By GARY JOSEPH LeBLANC Common Sense Caregiving

The Tampa Tribune

The Senate Special Committee on Aging estimates that as many as five million Americans may be victims of elder abuse every year.

It is not unusual for a caregiver to verbally lash out at his or her patient due to exhaustion or frustration. Some may not consider this to be an act of abuse. But verbal abuse is labeled as emotional or psychological abuse. This act is defined as "inflicting mental pain or distress from verbal mistreatment."

Sadly, I found myself occasionally shouting at my father after being tormented with the same question more than 50 times. When you feel yourself starting to boil, step outside, get some fresh air and kick some dirt around if you have to. It's bad enough it elevated to that point. Never let it escalate any further. These are significant signs of stress and the fact that you need a break. One gentleman, and I use that term loosely, told me that he once threw a hot bowl of soup on the man he was caring for. "The man kept claiming someone stole his soup at least twenty times while I was still heating it up for him. It just happened."

The next step, right around the corner, is physical abuse. This could include the following actions; pushing, shaking or even depriving patients of their basic needs such as withholding medications or over medicating them. Also by included would be any kind of physical punishment or restraint.

If you suspect this is happening to someone you know, look for signs including the caregiver suddenly refusing to allow visitors. Beware of a change in the patient's behavior when the abuser comes near. Alzheimer's patients or those who suffer from any kind of dementia are twice as vulnerable and the signs are more difficult to distinguish. One reason is that you can never get the same story from them twice in a row.

If you believe the abuse to be sexual, always investigate any allegations further. Signs of sexual abuse are not as apparent, so take what ever you're being told seriously.

Another common type of abuse is financial. The disappearance or concealment of funds, property or assets account for 30 percent of all abuse cases.

Neglect, another form of abuse, comes from depriving patients of their personal needs. This could include failing to supply proper clothing, shoes that do not fit correctly or even no shoes at all. Patients' clothing must also be appropriate to weather changes; coats and gloves for winter, shorts for summer.

Abandonment is leaving them alone when you know that they need constant supervision.

The laws on elder abuse vary across state lines, but legislators in all 50 states have passed some form of prevention laws.

The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study reported that there has been an increase in elder abuse of 150 percent in the past 10 years.

These senior citizens are fragile and vulnerable. If they weren't, they would not be in need of a caregiver. Some patients won't speak up for them themselves because they are afraid it might make matters worse. The fear of who will be taking care of them next keeps them quiet.

If you suspect you know of a vulnerable senior who is being abused, please look into the situation. There could be an actual risk of death involved here. You can contact the Department of Elder Affairs about your concerns.

Caregivers being over stressed is the number one cause of elder abuse. When you feel the pressure starting to build, find a way to get some respite. Call a friend or family member. Everyone needs a break.

For More Info

Elder Helpline: 1-800-96-ELDER (1-800-963-5337)

Report Elder Abuse: 1-800-96-ABUSE (1-800-962-2873)

Statewide Senior Legal Helpline: 1-888-895-7873