

Jacek J Pruszyński¹, Anita Gębska-Kuczerowska², Alicja Cicha – Mikołajczyk³, Lucyna Gromulska²

CHARACTER OF ABUSE TOWARDS THE ELDERLY THROUGH HISTORY

PONADCZASOWY CHARAKTER NADUŻYĆ WOBEC OSÓB W PODESZŁYM WIEKU

¹ Ośrodek Kształcenia Lekarzy Rodzinnych

Centrum Medycznego Kształcenia Podyplomowego

² Zakład Promocji Zdrowia i Szkolenia Podyplomowego

Narodowego Instytutu Zdrowia Publicznego – Państwowego Zakładu Higieny

³ Zakład Informatyki Medycznej i Biomatematyki

Centrum Medycznego Kształcenia Podyplomowego

STRESZCZENIE

Zjawisko nadużyć i zaniedbań oraz innych form dyskryminacji wobec osób starszych wplata się w historię społeczeństw. Każda kultura miała lub ma swój model starca i osadza starych ludzi według tego wzoru. Im bardziej model ten jest wyidealizowany, tym bardziej wymagające i mniej tolerancyjne wobec osób starych jest społeczeństwo. Uzyskane wyniki sugerują, iż znacząca grupa osób starszych w Polsce w mniejszym lub większym stopniu odczuwa nadużycia doznawane z powodu swojego wieku w różnych dziedzinach życia codziennego. Dotyczy to przeróżnych form gorszego traktowania, niekiedy tak utrwalonego w naszej świadomości, że trudno je dostrzec bez głębszego skupienia się na istocie problemu. Niestety postęp cywilizacji materialnej nie wystarcza, aby wyeliminować tego typu zachowania. Tym istotniejsze staje się monitorowanie problemu i udzielanie pomocy osobom narażonym na zjawiska nadużyć i przemocy, zwłaszcza tym, których zdolność do obrony jest osłabiona.

Słowa kluczowe: *starość, nadużycia, przemoc, historia*

ABSTRACT

Abuse, neglect and other forms of discrimination towards the elderly have always been present in history. There has been a model of “old person” in every culture, according to which older people are treated. The more idealized the model is, the less tolerant and more demanding society is towards the elderly. Presented results lead to the conclusion that significant number of older people feel mistreated because of their age in many aspects of daily life. Various forms of abuse may be difficult to thoroughly analyze, for they are so persistent in our collective consciousness. Unfortunately, material civilization progress is not sufficient to eliminate abuse. Thus, monitoring and relevant assistance to people exposed to abuse and violence, particularly those with compromised defense abilities, is crucial.

Key words: *old age, abuse, violence and history*

INTRODUCTION

When planning help for victims of violence, former attempts to stop it should necessarily be considered, in order to avoid repetition of ineffective or faulty actions. Similarly, when talking about violence in historical perspective, one should reflect on the issue of violence and position of the elderly in this context, throughout history.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From the very beginning of formation of society, coming of age as transition to adulthood was understood as building up one of major manly values of that time which was aggressiveness. One of the best lessons was hunting which shaped two attitudes – bond and friendship within peer group and aggression towards the others, strangers, often seen as wild, untamed animals. Certainly, not all could be hunters, who recruited among

the strongest, the hardest and the bravest, admired elite perceived as role models.

Hunting also reinforced sex roles. Male animals fought with the hunter whereas females were supposed to flee from oppression and actively confront the hunter only when protection of offspring was necessary. Social patterns of aggressive, active male and submissive, avoiding female were derived from the world of nature. Giving birth was the most significant moment for a female while mastering skilled use of force and violence put male higher in group hierarchy. This dynamics influenced lives of the elderly – incapable of direct fight for their rights. If they did not demonstrate power to threat others, they would fall victim to the younger and stronger hunters.

The phenomena of abuse and neglect, as well as other forms of discrimination to the elderly have always been interwoven with the history of societies. There was a proverb in ancient Rome: „Sexagenarii ex ponte!”, which translates as “Sixty-year-olds off the bridge!”. There was a custom of killing older and disabled people, present in German and Slavic tribes, and similar practices are mentioned also in Polish, Belorussian, Russian, Czech and Croatian legends. Good illustration may be story of a son hiding and feeding his old father, against social rules. In times of bad harvest and lack of grains for sowing, old man gives advice to rip the hay from the roof, thresh it, and sow the grains. As legends reads: “As gossip spread, killing of the elderly stopped, for they had wisdom in hard times, despite their disability to work” (1). Improvement of living conditions and cultural development appeased the custom of killing the older and disabled members of the group. Putting them in dark corner of the room, where they relied on good or bad attitude of the rest of the family, was considered sufficient. However, banish from home which resulted in begging was also common habit. “You do not work, then go tease dogs in the roads” – old man could hear. Further change was brought on with development of various social benefits. Regulations about entitlement to retirement and pension in the last century, made it possible for the older people to live independently of family help, but, at the same time, were not effective in prevention of other forms of abuse, neglect and discrimination of the elderly.

LIVES OF THE ELDERLY ACCORDING TO THEM AND THEIR CONTEMPORARIES

Fear of getting old has been strong in primitive societies as well as in our civilization. Ptah-hotep, vizier of Isesi pharaoh from V dynasty, ca. 2450 BC, wrote: “How unbearable is old man fate, he is weaker every day, his sight worsens, his ears cease to hear, his force

abandons him, his heart is restless, his mouth ceases talking and smells. His mind is limited; he is unable to recall the previous day. All his bones hurt. Work, he found pleasant earlier, now is difficult.” (2) In Greek civilization the motive of “curse of the old” prevails as well. In VII century BC, Mimnermos from Kolophon writes: “Happy are people who die at the age of sixty, for, when the sorrow of old days come deforming even handsome man, anxiety disturbs heart. Thus, sight of sunshine does not bring joy any more. Suddenly, you become unpleasant sight for women and boys. God has prepared hurtful old age for a man” (3).

Exquisite position of Sparta in ancient world was achieved thanks to Gerousia - a council of thirty old men, aged minimum 60, elected among Sparta citizens. Gerousia ruled country politics, particularly foreign affairs, constructed acts of law, was the highest court in case of crime, and also held right to sentences depriving citizenship or death sentences. Gerousia had a function of tribunal, which could question and convict kings and did not respond to anyone for its decisions. However, members of Gerousia must have been elected unanimously, which means they must have had exquisite and flawless reputation. The fact that Sparta always lacked in number of citizens and few of them survived many wars led by this country – barracks, had also its impact on the situation (4). Thus, the council composed of “the best of best” – warriors who would surely surpass any contemporary soldier, even from special forces, in terms of training, determination and war experience.

In the world of the Roman republic, father of the family (pater familias) had exceptional power over all family members until death (5). This was distinguishing characteristic of Roman society. Power of the father was in fact unlimited; he could sell his children as slaves, or sentence family member to death – after thorough investigation of the situation and after seeking advice in close relatives. The generation gap in such conditions was dramatic, as grown-up children were treated as juvenile until their father’s death. What is surprising is that the Roman Empire considered a step backwards from Roman Republic, brought improvement to family life. Father was deprived of power to sentence family member to death and he could not abandon newborn child. What is more, a woman could become legal guardian of children, and more often kept her right to dowry. Such shift in social rules was reflected in literature, where the motive of father – son conflict became rarity. One can get impression that Roman society and its descendants laughed at physical and psychic imperfections of the old age, since the fear of old and powerful man was disappearing.

In the world of the Hebrew, and, later, Christianity, old man image was honorably distinguished. That image was used in arts and has been present in successive

generations. "I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool" (6). Hebrew image of an old man as a symbol was the epitome of wisdom and God's eternity. Early Christians did not raise the issue of the old, which may be considered either as good or a bad sign. Later, church recommended taking care of those in need: the poor, widows, orphans, disabled, sick or the old, irrespective of their age or sex (7). In Hebrew and Christian culture, duality in the image of the old was also present. On one hand, old age was a form of punishment for sins. On the other hand, good old age resulted from good and virtuous life.

FACTORS INFLUENCING LIVES OF THE ELDERLY

Thinking about social status of the elderly through history, five conditions influencing it should be analyzed. First of them is physical weakness. In societies based on the law of the stronger, position of the elderly would be worse than in social groups where existing systems of common or official law defends the weaker against abuse of the stronger. Second of the conditions is knowledge and experience. More favorable towards the elderly are those cultures in which lore and custom are significant: old people play important part of joining generations and holding collective memory of the group. In this way they remain actively involved in society. Written culture where acts of law and customs are recorded in books and archives as well as higher position of law than custom in regulating life has degraded old people in social hierarchy. Progressing decrease in physical attractiveness is third condition influencing social position of the elderly. The more prevailing is beauty-worship in a group, the lower would be social status of older people. Where idea of beauty lies in more abstractive and symbolic world, not in the rigors of looks, the more respected the elderly will be. Family model is another condition which has impact on the elderly in the society. Patriarchal, multigenerational family would give more support to the elderly. Paradoxically, patriarchal family functions especially well in crises or powerful social transformations. In times of peace and stabilization where group bonds loosen, and family is understood as nuclear family, old people are more often alone. Financial condition influences lives if the elderly, too. In the society where property is directly connected with proprietor, position of older people would be higher what leads to resentment by the young. However, in cultures where land possession marks social status, older people depend on their offspring who are able to work and generate income.

In our times, in postfigurative culture, older people are paid much higher respect. Older generations transfer cultural patterns onto younger generations, who take succession from parents and grandparents. But, this traditional model is gradually fading away because older people are unable to keep up with fast pace of our life.

In every culture there has been an old man model, to which all older people are related. The more idealized this model has been, the more cruel and demanding of the elderly the society is. Most common demand of an old man is impeccable, flawless wisdom. Most models of old people, for reasons of their extraordinary values or faults, are very different from model qualities of a common man. Image of old man through history does not escape one of the worst deformities of truth which is extremity.

To sum up, right direction of thinking is to focus on particular group of older people with their unique needs in specific context, not any abstract theoretical approach describing old people as wizards above reality of the world.

CURRENT SITUATION OF THE ELDERLY

In our further reflection on being old, we will use the term "elder mistreatment" covering any form of maltreatment to the elderly, including abuse. One of American research concludes that only one of six acts of mistreatment; neglect or abuse of older people is reported to relevant institution (8). That statement reflects complexity of the problem and urges more attempts to recognize scope of the situation and forms of mistreatment in order to act more effectively.

As to analyze situation of older people, reality of elder mistreatment in Poland will be presented. According to the results of our pilot research (9), up to 28.84% of older people experienced maltreatment, caused in their opinion by their age, 23.97% knew the other older person who had similar experience, 18.17% of subjects were maltreated in hospital, 15.36% and 7.12% - were maltreated during specialist doctor and family doctor appointment respectively. Subjects reported maltreatment related to age in their professional life: 14.05% were directly exposed to maltreatment, and 24.53% witnessed such situations. The most common manifestation of discrimination at workplace were refusal to employment or redundancy due to age.

Only 6.18% of subjects did not feel disregarded in the area of drug policy and the rest reported various irregularities in this area, for example: 79.59% reported medicine prices too high and 47.94% complained about too small print for too read the information leaflet about their medicine.

The elderly were also asked about TV and radio programmes targeted at their age group. Only 13.67% stated that programme offer for older people met their expectations, whereas 29.59% felt that it ignores their needs. The rest of 55.99% responded that the level of response to their expectations is unsatisfactory. Radio programme offer was evaluated similarly: 17.79% responded it was satisfactory, 56.93% stated it was not sufficient and 20.41% reported the programme ignored their needs. Presented result lead conclusion that significant number of older people feel more or less mistreated because of their age in many aspects of daily life. This refers to many forms of mistreatment, to which we are so accustomed and we treat it as normal, that thorough analysis of the issue demands quite an effort.

VIOLENCE AGAINST THE ELDERLY

Violence – the most drastic form of mistreatment against the elderly – has not changed dramatically in history. It has been marked as taboo in the places and situations where it occurs, particularly in the family. Victims themselves as well as witnesses of domestic violence refrain from reporting it because they feel shame for their passiveness or helplessness. Reporting violence could spoil the perpetrator's reputation and, thus, lead to loss of his social or professional position and endanger life standard of the family. Talking openly about violence would surely cause perpetrator's vengeance and violence escalation (10). There are certain reasons on victim's side why violence against the elderly remains undisclosed. People who are weaker and unable to defend themselves are more prone to violence. Victims may feel ambivalent about legal actions against family member and unsure whether results of legal procedures, such as placing victim in a refuge or other institution, would be better than passive adjustment to violence which prevents from perpetrators revenge. Falling victim to domestic violence always leads to intense feeling of victim's guilt and, paradoxically, responsibility. Feeling of over-responsibility occurs particularly often in older parent – adult child relation, when parents blames themselves for disrespectful and appalling behaviour of their adult child seen as a result of wrong bringing-up in childhood. Victim may have also experienced misunderstanding and wrong, patronizing or ignoring reaction of witnesses, particularly those obliged to help and intervene. Stereotypes and misinterpreted social norms are to be blamed for hurtful disbelief in victims words reporting e.g. the fact of physical violence towards father or grandfather or old lady abusing her husband (11).

PERPETRATORS

Perpetrators of violence against older people are to be found most frequently among family members in the same household. However, results of research on probability of mistreatment of the elderly by their family members are not easy to interpret. According to common knowledge, perpetrators of violence against the elderly have been forced to take care of them, what leads to their distress manifesting as aggression, particularly in the situations of enormous physical and emotional effort of taking care of older person with dementia. Another factor playing important role in violence is genetic-environmental factors having impact on overall mental health. Mental disorders and diseases as well as alcohol and drug abuse increase the risk of violence, according to most researchers.

IDENTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE

Individual reports of violence to police, prosecution or other relevant institutions are not frequent because of mentioned above victim-perpetrator relation but also because of basic activities limitations of older age. That is why increasing sensibility in the environment is crucial to intervene effectively to prevent or stop violence. Health care system workers – doctors and nurses - are especially obliged to identify cases of violence and neglect to the elderly patients. They should be trained to notice even subtle incongruencies in patients or caretaker behaviour which may indicate violence. When caretaker does not leave the senior patient during medical examination and is reluctant to receive help (does not give consent to nurse's home visits or therapeutic procedures at home) or behaves improperly towards the older person who is visibly afraid, health care system should be alerted. Another alarming sign is medical interview about conditions of the ailment being inconsistent with the type and scope of the injury. Types of injuries which should always attract attention are: torso injuries, bruises, burns, any signs which may be result of any physical attack, fractures, dislocations, sprains. Health care worker who should remember that there are few causes of double sided or multi-location injuries, particularly if help is sought late, after many days. Another, more indirect symptoms of violence are: insomnia, hypersomnia, changes in appetite, tearfulness, low self-esteem, anxiety or withdrawal reaction (13).

Abused person may seek relief in tranquilizers, sedatives or alcohol abuse. Due to constant fear and alertness, victims of violence may suffer from unspecific stomachaches or chest pains, dysphagia or hyperventilation. Diagnosis of violence is more probable when we

see dehydration, malnutrition or ripped hair. Sometimes unexplained health deterioration may be a result of unprofessional therapy modification or its cessation by caretaker, malnutrition or lack of hygiene.

Intervention to help the victim of violence should be constructed and carried through by an interdisciplinary team of professionals: family doctor, nurse, psychologist, social worker, psychiatrist, legal advisor and the police (14). First task of this team should be verification if any former attempts to intervene ever took place, and in case of futility of that actions – evaluation of lack of effect in order to avoid similar mistakes. Construction of action plan should be next task. Thorough information and support to make an informed decision should be then given to the victim, without putting any extra tension on the person. Any helper must remember that the victim decides what to do in their particular situation, not any other person (15).

All the above outlined support will be actually workable on the condition every helper in the system is trained to identify abuse and provide the victims and witnesses with all necessary help (16).

CONCLUSION

As history shows, aggression and violence has always accompanied the human. Unfortunately, material civilization progress is insufficient to eliminate violence. Thus, it is vital to carefully monitor the problem and create mechanisms of optimal support to people exposed to any form of abuse, especially the elderly, whose ability to self-defense is weakened.

REFERENCES

1. Biegeleisen H. Lecznictwo Ludu Polskiego. Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności; 1929: 71-82
2. Minois G. Historia starości. Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza VOLUMEN; 1995: 26
3. Mimnermos. Liryki. W: Danielewicz J, red. Liryka Starożytnej Grecji. Wrocław: Ossolineum; 1984: 293-298.
4. Minois G. Historia starości. Warszawa: Ofic Wydaw VOLUMEN; 1995: 74
5. Veyne P. Historia życia prywatnego. Od Cesarstwa Rzymskiego do roku tysięcznego. Wrocław: Ossolineum; 2005: 85-88
6. Pismo Święte. Starego i Nowego Testamentu. Księga Daniela rozdział 7, wers 9. Warszawa: Wydawn Pallotinum; 1971: 1041
7. Minois G. Historia starości. Warszawa: Ofic Wydaw VOLUMEN; 1995: 127-146
8. Bomba PA. Nadużycia wobec osób starszych: „Starość nie powinna boleć”. W: Rosenthal T, Naughton B, Williams M, red. Geriatria. Lublin: Wydaw CZELEJ; 2009: 115-130.
9. Pruszyński J.J. i wsp. Assessment of discrimination of elderly people in Poland based on pilot survey. W: Tuszyńska-Bogucka W, red. Environment and wellness in different phases of life. Lublin: Wydaw NeuroCentrum; 2010: 201- 209.
10. Pousada L., Osborn H. H., Levy D. B. Medycyna ratunkowa. Wrocław: Urban & Partner; 1999: 541-545
11. Keim SM. Przemoc wobec osób starszych w podeszłym wieku. W: Keim S.A. red. Medycyna ratunkowa na dyżurze. Warszawa: PZWL; 2006: 389-392.
12. Pruszyński J. Rozpoznawanie objawów przemocy u pacjentów zgłaszających się do przychodni i oddziałów neurologicznych. Post Nauk Med 2009; 22 (11): 894-898.
13. Abrams WB, Beers MD, Berklow R. MSD Podręcznik geriatrii. Wrocław: Urban & Partner, 1999:1516-1524.
14. Woźniak B, Brzyska M. Przemoc wobec osób starszych – przegląd badań prowadzonych w Polsce. W: Tobiasz-Adameczyk B, red. Przemoc wobec osób starszych. Kraków: Wydaw Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego; 2009: 70-78.
15. Pruszyński JJ, Gębska-Kuczerowska A. Niebezpieczna starość. Niebieska Linia 2006; 6/47: 8-10.
16. Halicka M. Przemoc wobec ludzi starszych. W: Szatur – Jaworska B, red. Stan przestrzegania praw osób starszych w Polsce. Analiza i rekomendacje działań. Warszawa: RPO MAT, 2008 (65): 95-110

Received: 1.02.2011

Accepted for publication: 1.06.2011

Address for correspondence:

Dr med. Jacek J. Pruszyński
 Ośrodek Kształcenia Lekarzy Rodzinnych CMKP
 ul. Ostrobramska 101
 04-041 Warszawa
 email: jjpruszynski@wp.pl