

Abuse of elderly up, said often unintended

By SAWAKO OBARA
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Abuse of elderly people has been increasing physically, psychologically, economically and in neglect of required nursing care.

Some families also do not understand what dementia is and become victimizers.

One one incident in which a neighbor reported apparent abuse to a local government, an official who responded to the tip visited the home of a woman in her 80s living with one of her sons, finding her dazed and apparently unwashed and incontinent on her bed. A bottle of juice and a sweet bun were left next to her pillow.

The woman had dementia. Her son, in his 50s, had left her unattended as he was overwhelmed with how to take care of her, including changing her clothing and adult diapers.

The official said such neglect is not an extreme case, but it is often difficult for outsiders to know about it. Some families also think they are properly taking care of the aged but in fact are not.

According to a welfare ministry survey in fiscal 2008, consultations and reports about abuse of elderly people by their families numbered 21,692, with 14,889 cases judged as abuse, up 12 percent from fiscal 2007. Physical abuse accounted for 64 percent of the total in a multiple-choice questionnaire, followed by psychological abuse at 38 percent, neglect of care at 27 percent and economic abuse at 26 percent.

There were 3,976 consultation centers nationwide in fiscal 2008. Center employees visit the homes of possible abuse victims and if abuse is confirmed, the victims are sent to hospitals. If necessary, victims and their families are separated, and the victims are taken to facilities.

The Elder Abuse Prevention Law that took effect in fiscal 2006 allows municipal officials to do thorough audits in case of life-threatening abuse, and seek police intervention.

Using pension benefits, savings and other assets of elderly people by their relatives without their consent is believed to constitute another form of abuse, although in many cases, those who use the money feel it is only natural to do so because they are caring for the aged.

Kenichi Nagano, head of the Elder Abuse Prevention Center in Kita Ward, Tokyo, cited a rise in cases of offspring using their parents' money because of financial difficulties in recent years.

He said such cases come to light when it becomes difficult for offspring to pay for care services, when savings are suddenly withdrawn from parents' accounts and when there is a large gap between the income of the offspring and their living situation. "Children's neglect of nursing care because of their resistance to spend money is inextricably linked to economic abuse," Nagano said.

As for abuse prevention, early discovery is vital, said Kinuko Takasaki, head of the Japan Academy for the Prevention of Elder Abuse and a professor at the Open University of Japan, adding, "Everybody should know from an early age what abuse is.

"We'd like local governments to try to open people's eyes to abuse by pamphlets and other means, and support the creation of regional networks. It's good for the elderly to have others to confide in, whether they're medical doctors or friends, in an emergency," she said.



Protecting the elderly: Kenichi Nagano, who heads the Elder Abuse Prevention Center in Kita Ward, Tokyo, answers a phone at his office in November. KYODO PHOTO