

 

*Summary of the report:*

*This is not happening! Or does it?*

*Results from a pilot study on sexual abuse against older persons in nursing homes.*

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PREFACE

This report was commissioned by the Norwegian Pensioners’ Association who had a desire to put the spotlight on and increase knowledge about sexual abuse against older persons in nursing homes. The aim of the report has been to get an overview of current research in this field and to gain knowledge about employees' thoughts, experiences and attitudes about the topic. In this project we have chosen different approaches for collecting data, both qualitative and quantitative approach.

There has been little research in this area, the topic is still very taboo and the aim has not been to find all the answers, but to give a small contribution to putting the spotlight on and increase knowledge about this serious subject.

The undersigned, who is employed as associate professor at NTNU, has been leading the project and had overall responsibility for the project and writing of the report, but would not have been possible without the important contribution of my colleagues. Maria Helen Iversen (employed by Lovisenberg Deaconess University College) and Valgjerd Frengen Saebo (employed at NTNU) has contributed through choosing this topic as their master thesis projects. I have been supervising both in their master's theses, and followed the process from beginning to end, but the majority of the work with the respective sub-studies they have stood for themselves. Thanks to Maria and Valgjerd the problem has been elucidated in a broader and more thorough manner than what had been possible without them. Astrid Kilvik, who is librarian (now at Queen Maud University College, Trondheim), has provided invaluable assistance both with the literature study and to get the references right. Thanks to you!

A big thanks to The Norwegian Pensioners’ Association who recognize sexual abuse of older persons as a problem, discovered the lack of knowledge and asked me to lead to this report. Cooperation with The Norwegian Pensioners’ Association has been an undivided pleasure and I hope that the report meets some of the expectations.

The project has provided some answers but also given birth to many questions. As a researcher, one would think that one should find the answer with a capital A, but research is just as much finding new questions that require new studies. In this way we believe that the world is progressing.

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**Background**

During recent years there have been some media reports with reported cases of sexual abuse against older people, both older people living at home and residents in institutions. Sexual abuse of older people, including rape, is incomprehensible and arouses disgust, and one thinks that this must be isolated incidents perpetrated by disturbed people. A sexual assault of an old man in a dark grove can be explained by a sick perpetrator without inhibitions, but what about sexual abuse in nursing homes? Who is it that abuse frail older people? Does the perpetrator enter the institution with the purpose to commit a crime? How often does it happen? Who is the abuser? What do health professionals do about this? Can this kind of abuse be prevented? The questions are many and The Norwegian Pensioners’ Association has had a desire to find as many as possible answers.

**Method**

The purpose of this report is to illuminate and increase knowledge of sexual abuse against older persons in nursing homes. The aim was to get an overview of current research in this field and to gain knowledge about employees' thoughts, experiences and attitudes about the topic. In this project we have chosen different approaches for collecting data, both qualitative and quantitative approach. First, we did a systematic literature review to find published studies specifically on sexual abuse in nursing homes. Furthermore, this is complemented by two empirical studies, including one based on a focus group interview with nursing home staff and one survey, the aim of both was to highlight employees' thoughts about, experiences with, and attitudes towards abuse of older residents.

**What is sexual abuse?**

There are various definitions of sexual abuse. “Protection for Older Persons” states that it concerns "Any kind of unwanted sexual contact" (www.vernforeldre.no). Sexual abuse can include the threat or coercion to participate in a sexual activity. This can range from being exposed to aggressive obscenities and behavior, being forced to watch porn and consummated rape.

**Results from the literature study**

The purpose of the literature study was to obtain an overview of current research in the area, which studies have been conducted, what were the aim of the studies, and what where the results. Results from extensive search shows that there is little research on sexual abuse in nursing homes and there were only six studies from the United States that met our inclusion criteria. The review of studies shows that sexual abuse occur in nursing homes and that both men and women are victims of this type of abuse. The perpetrator is usually an employee or another nursing home resident, and usually men, but one must be aware that women can abuse older men and women. Nursing homes often show inability to handle abuse cases and some are calling for more knowledge among healthcare professionals allowing sexual abuse cases to be handled in an appropriate manner.

**Results from focus group interviews**

The topic raised strong reactions among the nurses in the focus group. All expressed very negative emotions. They would rather not believe that older persons could be subjected to sexual abuse. Anger, sadness, disgusting, mentally unwell and nausea were the emotions that were triggered by nurses when they discussed this. The results show that sexual abuse of older persons is a taboo topic among health professionals. These acts are so unthinkable for many that one can hardly imagine that it occurs. Yet it was during the discussion clear that a couple of nurses had experienced episodes where residents had been subjected to sexual abuse. The fact that employees are not aware that it could happen, or find it hard to believe that it could have happened, can enhance older persons’ vulnerable position as potential victims of abuse. That makes it even more challenging to report about or even to uncover, abuse.

There was a big discussion in the group regarding what actions they would have taken if a patient had been exposed to a sexual abuse. All agreed that they would have notified a sexual abuse. It was uncertainty around to whom or where they should reported to first. Some would have called the police, others were unsure about whether the leader of the unit/nursing home should be notified first. However, there was great uncertainty about procedures and what measures should be implemented and which agencies should be notified in such a case.

It was discussed that negative attitudes toward older persons may be a reason for not setting the spotlight on abuse, including sexual abuse. Questions were asked about why there are no requirements in relation to criminal records to work with older, when such a police certificate is required to work with other vulnerable groups such as children and the mentally retarded. Nurses claimed that introducing such a police certificate could be an important step in addressing the older persons’ security seriously. And, it would be an important step in preventing sexual abuse.

Nurses called for education about sexual abuse against older persons as part of education for health professionals. None of them had learned about the subject in their basic or further education. They believed that this subject should be included as part of the basic training of health professionals in order to create more awareness about this. The nurses thought that lack of education was because the topic is so taboo. It was also discussed in the group that the health authorities should publish an information booklet about abuse of older persons, as well as a booklet specifically for sexual abuse. These booklets should be available both for health professionals and relatives.

**Results from the survey**

The main purpose of this study was to determine whether sexual abuse of older persons in nursing homes occur, and further investigate employees’ attitudes in relation to sexual abuse. Furthermore, the study examined whether the staff know what to do when such incidents occur.

The results are based on a survey among staff in two nursing homes in a county in the middle of Norway the first two weeks in October 2014. Overall, 64 staff filled in the questionnaire.

When asked about knowledge of the occurrence of sexual abuse, 20 respondants reported that they had such knowledge, and 15 were not certain that the incidents they observed was a sexual abuse. They who answered "yes" or "uncertain" whether they were aware of sexual abuse reported from 2-20 incidents. The staff responded that the largest group of abusers where co-residents, secondly relatives and fewest staff.

The results show that the staff take a clear distance from the sexual abuse of older persons. When it comes to knowledge about handling such cases, more than half of the respondents answer that they do not know what measures they should take if a nursing home resident were subjected to sexual abuse.

**Summary**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the status of knowledge of sexual abuse against older persons in institutions, through a literature review. Furthermore, this was complemented by two empirical studies, including one based on a focus group interview with nursing home staff, and one survey. The aim of both was to highlight employees' thoughts, experiences and attitudes around the topic.

The three sub-studies show that sexual abuse against older persons in nursing homes occur, and that both older men and women are victims of this type of abuse. Perpetrators may be staff, relatives and co-residents. The staff are unsure how they should report such cases and nursing homes often show inadequate handling of abuse cases. Findings show that sexual abuse against older persons is still a taboo topic among health professionals. The acts are for many so unthinkable that one can hardly imagine that it occurs. The fact that staff are not aware that it could happen, or find it hard to believe that it could have happened, can enhance the older persons’ vulnerable position as potential victims of abuse. That makes it even more challenging to report or even to uncover abuse.

The findings from the literature study, focus group and survey show that there is a need for knowledge and further research on the topic of sexual abuse against older persons in nursing homes. Knowledge about this taboo topic should be available to managers and other staff working in municipal elderly care. It is also necessary that this topic is being implemented in health professional education. By that, those working in elderly care would gain an increased awareness that sexual abuse occurs in nursing homes, and they will be able to facilitate the prevention and measures of sexual abuse. The considerable uncertainty the staff is reporting by the observed sexual abuse shows a need to implement effective policies and reporting systems at the municipal nursing homes and care centers.

Police certificate must be introduced as a mandatory requirement in all municipalities. Future research on a larger scale than this one is needed in order to reveal more about this taboo area.

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