



## **Key practices for social workers**

*Working with older people*

### **Lesley Ann Cull**

You are going to hear from practitioners who have experience working with vulnerable adults. First you are going to hear about the work of Age Concern.

### **Jonathan Stern**

I'm Jonathan Stern and I am Head of Public Affairs at Age Concern, which means I am responsible for the campaigning, parliamentary and press work of the organisation. Age Concern started out from an organisation which essentially aimed at helping poor pensioners who were having a very hard time straight after the war. And since then it's developed into an organisation which works at every level. I suspect most people would know of an Age Concern very close to them. And it now has something like a quarter of a million people working within it, either as paid employees or as volunteers. And so we provide services on the ground in terms of day centres and other services, and also we work at a national level and we do try and press very hard at a central level on issues linked to older people.

### **Lesley Ann Cull**

I asked Jonathan why the campaigning work that Age Concern is involved in is so important

### **Jonathan Stern**

If we are successful at campaigning, it means that we can actually help thousands of people to have a better life and that's what Age Concern aims at, is to actually make older life an enjoyable life. For example we campaigned very hard against increases on VAT in the last government, on fuel, and as a result of that campaigning the VAT wasn't increased.

### **Lesley Ann Cull**

Next I asked Jonathan about the importance of the law and law reform work in relation to older people.

### **Jonathan Stern**

The law affects older people in every walk of life. Whenever we talk about older people, remember that older people are transport users, they are car users, issues around the environment affect older people. But there are obviously very key areas that do affect older people in relation to Social Services and other areas of the law. But interestingly enough, older people haven't actually featured over much in legislation unlike children for example. Some of the issues that concern us are to do with access to services, are to do with for example, mental capacity, but some of the issues we have also been campaigning around, for example age discrimination. Now there's no legislation that outlaws age discrimination and indeed we are actually looking to try and introduce legislation to outlaw the discrimination against older people. And obviously a very key thing coming up which is actually is going to affect older people is human rights, and human rights legislation.

### **Lesley Ann Cull**

How has professional practice in respect of working with older people changed over recent years, and what changes are still needed?

### **Jonathan Stern**

I think one of the key changes that's happening is that we're gradually moving away from just seeing the issues linked to age and to older people to be linked to those who are frail and elderly. What's gradually been happening is there's been an awareness that you actually need to think about the social lives that older people have, and the emotional lives that older people have, and not just think about older people as actually being at the period towards the

end of their life when they are frail, or possibly might be frail and elderly. And by actually looking at people in a wider context it means we can actually get much better services. There have been some very key and some very positive examples of local authorities getting together with the voluntary sector within their area and with older people themselves to try and improve the service as it exists. But we need to see more of that, and basically we need to see a recognition of the rights of older people and the one thing that we are forever being told by older people is they actually want to live in their own homes. They don't want to be whisked away somewhere else, they want to stay in the home that they are living in.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

Jonathan then talked about how he thought changes would best be secured.

**Jonathan Stern**

It's absolutely vital that we have input from older people and clearly most of the work we do particularly at a local level, is with older people and for older people but it's important that we understand what older people need and actually work with them and actually empower older people as much as we can. But also the work we do at a national level, we could never get any publicity we get or any of the issues raised in Parliament if they weren't linked to the real needs of older people.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

What does he see as some of the key skills required when working with older people?

**Jonathan Stern**

I think the key thing is to treat people as individuals. It doesn't matter how old we are, we all have needs, we all have emotions, we all have desires and actually work with people as individuals, but also make decisions that are based on sound knowledge, and if you don't know something, go and check it. Because one of the things that we find often is that people are given bad and poor advice and we have to often unravel and unwrap that advice that they have been given. So it's absolutely vital that when you are going to be the first port of call, that you do actually have the correct advice, you do give people the support that they need. But I think essentially is actually look at people's needs and if they say they want to stay at home, recognise that and actually see how you can work towards that. Just basically treat people as people, not as objects. In some ways I think Age Concern has been guilty of missing in the past, is to actually look at the needs of particular groups of older people and particularly black and ethnic groups, an indeed, gay and lesbian groups of older people as well, because there are key needs which we need to recognise.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

The next speaker is going to talk about issues raised by elder abuse for those working with older people.

**Jackie Prichard**

I'm Jackie Pritchard. I trained as a Social Worker a long time ago and managed social workers for a long time. But now I am actually training and acting as a consultant and researcher to different organisations in the statutory voluntary and independent sectors.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

I asked Jackie how she would define elder abuse.

**Jackie Prichard**

The categories are physical, emotional, financial, neglect and sexual abuse. Physical abuse is the classic sort of kicking, punching, slapping somebody as well, but it can be abuse of medication, withdrawing, or over-medicating somebody or literally starving somebody which could be neglect as well, there's a lot of overlap between the categories. Emotional abuse I think is really difficult to define because we can all be emotionally abused in different ways, but the classic things would be like ridicule, threatening somebody, verbal, bullying – that's often an area that's neglected because bullying could be physical or emotional.

Financial abuse covers a whole gamut of things. I mean, it's just the mismanagement of somebody's financial assets. And neglect really can be passive or active neglect, so we've got physical neglect, the classic sort of lack of basic care for somebody, things that we would take for granted. People aren't getting, like, washing, dressing, that sort of thing. And emotional neglect, everybody need stimulation, interaction and sometimes we just neglect people, ignore them, and I think that's very prevalent perhaps in residential settings where staff are rushing around, pressure of work, and they're not interacting with people as they should.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

What have been some of the difficulties in identifying elder abuse?

**Jackie Prichard**

I think the problem has been that everybody has been quite narrow to date, just looking at it as carer stress, you know somebody lashing out who's at the end of their tether. I think it's much more complicated than that, and I think we're now picking up more cases because more professionals and workers in the voluntary sector are being trained to find it. So they are finding it once you start looking for it. But on the project I've just worked on, there's actually been a lot of self referral and really my finding is that if you give permission to speak, if they know they are going to be believed or they can talk to somebody that they trust, then they will disclose.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

I asked Jackie if there's have been any changes in the way elder abuse is identified and whether the law can help to promote better practice in the care of older people.

**Jackie Prichard**

I think we've moved on in the past decade really because now most social services and some health authorities have developed policies, so there's a lot of clear guidance in the way in the statutory sector. Sometimes people don't know how to handle a disclosure and where to take it, they are very mixed up about confidentiality and when you break it, but I think with the new Crime and Disorder Act that's clearer about sharing information. Section 115 actually says that if you think that somebody could be a victim of crime and a lot of abusive behaviour could result in a criminal offence, then you have the power to share that information, and it states very clearly the four types of organisation, so you can pass that information on to anyone within a health authority, a local authority, the probation service and the police. And I think it's very important that people do that and record their reasons why they are actually breaking confidentiality and alerting people that somebody might be at risk of abuse.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

Are there certain key principles or issues to which social workers should have regard when working with older people?

**Jackie Prichard**

I think you've got to have an understanding of the client group you're working with, whether it's an adult with mental health problems, learning disability or an older person. You've got to have the commitment to understanding they might have different sorts of problems and really to focus on what are the appropriate resources to help this person. Because a lot of older people just want to tell their story once, get it over with, they don't want the long-term counselling and therapy, they just need to tell somebody, get it off their chest, and that's it. But the other resources we need, a and a lot of women have said to me that they didn't know who to turn to, which is very similar to younger women in domestic violence situations, that they feel trapped and very scared of the abuser and the implications if they do run away. That's very similar as well, so I think a lot of resources we use for younger adults could actually be used for older people as well.

**Lesley Ann Cull**

Finally, I asked Jackie what are the options open to victims of elder abuse? How can social workers safeguard and promote the welfare of older people?

**Jackie Prichard**

I think it's very frightening that the figures are showing about 90% of victims choose to stay in the abusive situation, and if it's a family member who is doing the abuse, I think it's because maintaining the relationship with the abuser is much more important than actually stopping the abuse. But if they do choose to leave, and what worries me about older people is we're always offering them the traditional resources like residential care, and I do worry that we are not creative enough in looking at options, like could they live on their own with some support, or sheltered accommodation. I'm not saying that all workers are not imaginative, but I do think we need to do the work and not rush people into making major life decisions to fit the procedure. You know, because most procedures say, you do the investigation, you have to convene the case conference within 10 or 15 working days, none of us would make major life decisions in two or three weeks really.