



### D54 Disabilities and Elderly Abuse: A Preliminary Forensic Approach

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The goal of this presentation is to raise awareness and to characterize elder abuse in persons with disabilities in Portugal.

This study will impact the forensic science community by promoting an earlier detection and diagnosis of elder abuse and giving better guidance for the implementation of prevention strategies.

The normal process of aging makes elders more vulnerable and fragile, and therefore more prone to poor health than the rest of population. As the dependence increases, demands on family caregivers or trained health or social workers become higher, bringing a huge socio-economic impact and stress to the families, thus facilitating an abusive environment. This fact, associated with physical and/or mental disabilities, increases even more the risk of elderly abuse. Literature studies that approach elderly abuse have only recently started to appear, and thus the association between disabilities and elderly abuse is still in a lead-off period of research. Reported cases of abuse evaluated at forensic medical services constitute only a small part of the real number of cases, but their analysis can bring us important knowledge regarding this problem. Since there are few studies in Portugal concerning this issue, the general aim of the present study is to contribute to a better characterization of elder abuse in persons with disabilities in this country.

A retrospective study was carried out at the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences in the years 2010–2011 based on the forensic medical reports performed during this period. The selected sample includes alleged victims of abuse, over 64-years-old, and with physical and/or mental disabilities (n=42). A disabled person was considered as one without autonomy and with a permanent impairment rate over 70%. This number corresponds to 7.1% of the total of alleged elderly abuse victims observed at the same place and period.

The majority of the victims were: women (66.7%); retired (95.2%); married (71.4%); with physical disabilities (71.4%; e.g., motor disability), mental disabilities (14.3%; e.g., dementia), or both (14.3%; e.g., neurological disorders due to stroke). Average age was 77.6 years old. Women were mostly abused by their partners (46.4%) and men by their children (50%). The alleged offenders were mainly: males (61.9%); victim's relative (97.6%) – 54.2% victim's children; living with the victims (76.2%). In 19% abuse pointed reason was the offender's abusive alcohol consumption. Most of the reported cases were related with physical abuse (95.2%) consisting in kicking, slapping, punching, and pushing (76.2%). There were no lesions in 38.1% and in 97.6% lesions were mild. The elapsed time since the last offense and the forensic medical evaluation was superior to eight days in 31%. Abuse was recurrent in 59.5% of the cases.

Published data states that abuse is more frequent among people with high levels of dependence compared with older people not so dependent, leading one to consider that the number of cases obtained in this study is clearly underestimated and that they aren't being detected or are underreported; actually, due to their lack of autonomy, these individuals are unable to disclose abuse, which also impairs their detection. Results corroborate some of the risk factors that are described in literature for victims (female; more than 74-years-old) and for offenders (male; victim's relative—especially children; alcohol misuse). Even without serious lesions (almost 100% of the cases) this kind of violence can have relevant physical and mental health consequences for elderly people, with socio-familial and financial repercussions, which must be considered in future studies. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to implement strategies to protect people with disabilities because this health condition increases both the risk of abuse and of nondisclosure. One of the preventive measures should be the implementation of a mandatory notification by the health care professionals to the competent entities at the time of discharge of physically or mentally impaired persons, since they completely disappear from the social and health services radar. Another measure should be creating temporary residencies for these persons in order to give the caregivers some resting time.

#### **Elder, Abuse, Disability**