

Abuse of the elderly: Misuses of power

ERIC J. CASSELL, MD

At first thought it would seem that no particular ethical issues are raised by the abuse of the elderly. Abuse of anyone is wrong, and abuse of the elderly seems particularly offensive. It is this intuitive feeling of outrage about intentionally injuring, misusing, or wronging old people that provides a clue as to what we really mean by the word "abuse." In the ensuing discussion, I express the belief that sometimes when physicians employ their power in a manner they believe to be in the best interests of sick, elderly persons, the physicians are abusing their patients.

When one is old enough, kitchens, bathrooms, and even bedrooms are traps for failed memories and unsteady bodies. Yet we do not consider old persons to have been abused by a bathtub or a shower if they are injured in them. Even the old person who is attacked on the street and beaten or mugged has not been abused in the sense in which we usually employ the term. We reserve the term abuse primarily for those situations in which a person, object, or relationship is wrongly used. This derives from the idea that to use something is to have a relationship with it. To abuse someone means, therefore, to violate the terms of the relationship, to take advantage of the relationship, to use it to the advantage of the user and the disadvantage of the used. The elderly are abused when others in relationship to them use them to their disadvantage.

Relationships of all types, whether with persons or medical instruments, restrict our freedom. To be in a relationship with another person is in some sense to be responsible to the person. To use an instrument is to be responsible for the instrument, although to a different degree than is understood in human relationships. In this era we have come to believe that we have enormous freedom of choice and few restrictions on that freedom. But we have mistaken our enormous political freedom as citizens—which has given us rights and, therefore, power in relationship to the state, its agents, and other citizens that would have been unheard of even a generation ago—with freedom from responsibility for persons, relationships, and objects. It is as though the possession of our enormous individual power to make things happen, multiply the force of our muscles, span distance and time, reduce inequities of personal endowment, increase the computational power of our brains,

have access to knowledge and information, and defeat disease and death, entitles us to use this power without restraint.

It is human nature for the individual and the group to be more concerned with the exercise and extension of political and technologic power than they are with the restraint of such power. When persons acquire power, they not only want to employ it, but are jealous of it and guard against intrusions or limitations. In the arena of individual freedom this translates, for example, into the use of law and lawsuits as instruments of personal aggression, and rejection of governmental authority no matter how benignly (as in the United States) it had been previously regarded. In the same manner, a population composed of persons intent each on his or her own individual power might be expected to reject authority in general. It should be no surprise that many of the abuses of the elderly stem from our concentration on our powers with neglect of the restraints imposed on us by the web of our relationships.

An examination of some of the kinds of abuse currently suffered by the elderly will make it possible to see how these generalizations about individual power in the modern era apply to the problem.

ABUSE OF THE ELDERLY BY THEIR CHILDREN

Reports of the physical abuse of old persons by their children or other relatives are more common than one might have thought possible. The elderly are sometimes found to have been beaten regularly, tied to beds, or confined to small spaces. They do not complain to authorities because they are frightened of further physical punishment and because they do not see alternatives to their situation. As with battered children, the awfulness comes not only from the infliction of corporal punishment, but from the lack of justification for any punishment for the offenses described. Battering parents frequently cite the child's crying as the reason for the battering. In the case of the elderly, their complaints about ill treatment are given as the reason for the abuse.

How can a person beat up an old man or woman at all, much less a mother or father? While parents may be perceived as wicked and unloving to their children, with bad memories and life-long resentments a natural consequence, most would not find this to be a justification for retaliatory abuse a generation later. It was wrong when done to the child, and it is wrong when done to the parent.

From the Department of Public Health, Cornell University Medical College, and New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, New York, NY.
Address correspondence to Dr Cassell, 1550 York Ave, New York, NY 10028.
Presented April 22, 1983, at the Annual CME Assembly of the Medical Society of the State of New York at a symposium sponsored by the Committee on Bioethical Issues, "Human Abuse Through the Ages: From the Womb to the Tomb."

