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Crime and Older People, ISBN 0 642 22739 X

Concluding Discussion

Chair: Mr David Biles

**Participants: Mr Lange Powell
Mr Paul Sadler
Mr Ron Cahill
Professor Ezzat Fattah
Ms Marianne James
Chief Superintendent Geoff Edwards**

The Chair invited participants in the final panel discussion to express their views on directions for the future, particularly in terms of policy and research.

Lange Powell opened the discussion by addressing three themes. The first is the need to recognise the diversity of the ageing population. With over 2 million people over 65, it is inevitable that there will be a huge diversity of life styles, of aspirations, of cultural backgrounds, of degrees of fear about crime or other forms of vulnerability. He suggested that approaches to the reduction of crime as well as providing protection from abuse should reflect that diversity by reducing older people's isolation, providing accurate information to people about what their circumstances really are and what services are available to them, and the importance of empowering people to retain a maximum degree of independence.

The second theme is what Mr Powell termed the 'harmonisation of effort' from different organisations, such as different levels of government and community agencies. This kind of harmonisation requires constant maintenance. There are a whole variety of influences that either sharpen or alleviate older people's sense of vulnerability. Similarly, in the field of protection of older people, there are identifiable groups of older people who are at higher risk than others.

The third theme is marketing and communication of safety messages. The question of whether the notion of protection of older people should focus on the aged as a special needs group or whether it should be incorporated in issues of safety and family violence generally was raised. The media have a positive role to play here by giving messages about 'confident living'. Efforts should be made to find ways of operating with the media in ways which recognise the commercial realities of producing television, radio and the press, but at the same time provides older people with some accurate information about ways in which they can preserve their independence.

Paul Sadler then commented about the abuse and neglect of older people. He emphasised five specific directions which had been highlighted by the conference and which he believes are ways to proceed in the future. These are: the development of cooperative service protocols including the identification of key agencies in each State to respond to the abuse of older people; the development of education programs for staff and volunteers; the development of innovative schemes where vulnerable people isolated at home could be linked with another member of their local community so that practical assistance may be given; the development of community education; and the need to pursue further research, particularly to trial different interventions to establish which is the most successful way of assisting people where abuse and neglect is occurring as well as

interviewing victims and their families to find out what sort of help they would find most useful.

Ron Cahill reiterated the need for a coordinated approach in public awareness concerning the availability of options to protect older people; one which would include appropriate evaluation. Mr Cahill questioned the appropriateness of mandatory reporting in cases of elder abuse and neglect and made the point that informed consent for the aged in respect of any action taken in this area is vital. He mentioned the inadequacy of existing formal guardianship and management options and suggested that these need revising. There needs to be a relatively common approach through all jurisdictions to enable a better understanding of the private guardianship alternative. The problem of obtaining suitable guardians, managers and advocates from the community who older people can trust remains difficult. It should be a matter for government and community initiative to develop appropriate training and supervision courses for such people. In fact, a voluntary community advocate, guardian or manager is a better option than a publicly employed one. Public advocates, guardians and managers should be the option of last resort. In summary, Mr Cahill recommended that the present private guardianship on a consensual basis for competent older people should be expanded and incorporated into the existing Guardianship and Management of Property Tribunal system. This would provide the necessary registration, supervision and accountability that is needed.

Professor Ezzat Fattah made the point that the fact that older people are more afraid of crime than other age groups, despite their lower victimisation rates, indicates that there is a need for a different, imaginative, innovative as well as a more subtle approach when trying to alert them to the risks of victimisation. It is also necessary to enhance older people's awareness of certain types of crime to which they may be particularly vulnerable. He confirmed the need to convey reassuring messages to

older people, as well as the need for information campaigns which are likely to correct their misconceptions about the chances of being victimised, as confidence building and confidence enhancing strategies. Related to this is the need to explore ways and means of developing more sensible and more responsible reporting of crime news by the media as well as how to counter the effects of the alarming messages which various interests are conveying about the elderly crime situation.

Professor Fattah also drew attention to the many problems inherent within the concept of "elder abuse", both definitional and operational. He questioned the utility of the concept and criticised its vagueness, ambiguity and elasticity as well as the way it was either defined too broadly or too narrowly - whichever fitted the purpose of the researcher. He also felt that the notion of "elder abuse" could be seen as stigmatising because it fostered a sense of weakness and vulnerability. The problems of over-protectiveness associated with guardianship issues because of the relative and ambiguous nature of many of the underlying notions such as senility, incompetency and disability was also raised. Finally, Professor Fattah mentioned that some of the crime prevention programs designed to alert older people to certain risks and dangers or by instructing them on how best to protect or defend themselves might have the adverse effect of raising their already high levels of fear of crime. Too much attention has been paid to the types of crimes which are committed infrequently against older people, while other crimes to which they may be particularly susceptible or which are particularly worrisome are often not given high priority. There is clearly a need for additional research and more relevant policy.

Marianne James felt that the strong emphasis on the often repeated notion that older people are the least victimised members of society while being the most fearful, perhaps prevents moving on more positively to how society can be made a much safer place in which older people can live. There is a need to look more

specifically at creating safer communities through a multi-agency approach with implementation at the local government level. It is possible to take into account that the aged population is a diverse group and to take more than one approach when trying to improve their quality of life. However, the most important point is that older people themselves must always be included in any consultation about policies which will affect them.

Chief Superintendent Geoff Edwards spoke about the importance of an education program directed at police officers so that the concept of community policing may be expanded to include both prevention and detection. Policing must involve community safety with a corresponding quality of life. The educative process needs to be extended to the wider population so that they have a better knowledge of what constitutes community policing and how the direction has changed. Chief Superintendent Edwards called for the police to be the "prime players" in crime prevention strategies. He also made a plea for the media to be more responsible and less sensationalist in their crime reporting.