

**Submission
No 12**

INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO ELDER ABUSE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ageing (MACA)

Date received: 11/11/2015

THE DIRECTOR
GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 2
PARLIAMENT HOUSE
MACQUARIE ST
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Director,

The NSW Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ageing (MACA) is appointed to advise the NSW Government, through the Minister for Ageing, on issues relating to matters affecting the needs, interests and well-being of older people in NSW, and the impact of population ageing on Government and the community. On behalf of the MACA, I welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Legislative Council inquiry into elder abuse in New South Wales.

Increasingly it is acknowledged that older people are at significant risk of experiencing abuse by someone they know and trust. Elder abuse may be physical, social, financial, psychological or sexual and can include mistreatment and neglect. It can destroy an older person's quality of life, and significantly increase their risk of untimely death.

While elder abuse is a consequence of the relationships between the elderly victims and their carers, there are also social problems which exist prior to abuse occurring and lay the framework for abuse to occur in later years. I emphasise that age discrimination or 'ageism' is a factor that should be considered when discussing abuse in older populations. Abuse flourishes when respect does not exist. Older people experience ageism in many forms, but elder abuse is arguably the most harmful and distressing.

In Australia, older people face a number of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, which often stem from negative stereotypes or misconceptions about older people. As the Australian Human Rights Commission discovered in their *Age Positive: Promoting Positive and Diverse Portrayals of Older Australians* research (November 2012), existing stereotypes foster a view that older people are seen as unable to learn or change, they complain a lot, are likely to be sick, victims of crime and are an economic burden on society.

Either consciously or unconsciously, older people are often considered to be less capable, dependent, vulnerable and a 'burden' on the community. The reality, however, is quite different. Older people are more visible, active and independent

than ever before. The overwhelming majority of older people live in private accommodation. Many older people participate in the workforce, and many provide financial support for adult children or other relatives.

The media and advertising industry have had a key role in constructing and reinforcing stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards older Australians. The prevalence of stereotypes and the underrepresentation of older people in the media impacts both public and private conversations about ageing.

Ageism, when combined with other domains of disadvantage, such as poverty, disability, and cultural and linguistic diversity, may put some older people at greater risk of becoming victims of abuse. As ageist attitudes become entrenched in our culture, older people may internalise feelings of low self worth, become more passive and feel more dependent. Such perceptions can lead to an older person believing that they deserve to be treated more poorly than others and avoid speaking up when experiencing abuse from family members or a caregiver. Many older people may not be willing to report elder abuse because of the isolation that comes from a lack of self esteem and a feeling of invisibility. Ageism can also affect our understanding of the prevalence and severity of elder abuse and cause many instances of abuse to go unnoticed.

As Australia's population ages, it is likely that elder abuse will increase unless it is more comprehensively recognised and addressed. Establishing adequate systems of prevention of elder abuse should be a long term goal of governments. At a minimum, we need government to take the lead in raising awareness among the community about the broader social causes of elder abuse.

Changing attitudes to age, and encouraging greater intergenerational contact with older people, must be a central plank of a meaningful response to elder abuse. Portrayals of older people should emphasise celebrating the contribution made by older people. They are diverse individuals with their own needs, preferences and life stories. Older people have a wealth of experience and knowledge that provides a wonderful resource for the community.

There is much scope for constructive collaboration between government, the media, advertisers and the private sector to present older Australians in a more accurate, balanced and diverse manner, and to reflect more realistically their value, capability and experience. Greater awareness of the damaging effects of negative stereotypes on both the lives of older people and on the cohesiveness of our society is needed.

The social inclusion of older members of our community represents a great opportunity and challenge for NSW in the context of our ageing population. Changing attitudes to age and perceptions of ageing is essential to creating an inclusive NSW for people of all ages. The MACA has made leading the conversation in reducing ageism a strategic focus of our work. Our efforts aim to help shift

perceptions of ageing by the public, government and private sectors, and by older people themselves, and to help combat discrimination.

The MACA will work with the NSW Government on developing responses to address elder abuse in the community. We look forward to the outcomes of this inquiry and would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss this further.

If you have any questions in relation to this submission, please contact the MACA Secretariat on 9716 2845 or NSW.MACA@facs.nsw.gov.au.

Regards

Kathryn Greiner AO
Chair