

**TALK AGAINST ELDER ABUSE ONLINE PUBLIC FORUM  
OPENING ADDRESS  
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC,  
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA  
MONDAY 15<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2020**

Thank you for inviting to open the Talk Against Elder Abuse on World Elder Abuse Awareness Day.

I wish to pay my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land—the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and who continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

We have a lot to learn from Aboriginal culture about respect for elders. As Aboriginal poet, Zelda Quakawoot has written:

We will honour our elders  
Till the chains of time rust  
They shared their legacy  
From the oceans to the dusts.<sup>1</sup>

Elder abuse is defined by the World Health Organisation as ‘a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person’. It can take various forms, such as physical abuse, psychological or emotional abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect.

Psychological or emotional abuse is one of the most common types of elder abuse and includes verbal abuse, name calling and bullying. Examples include threatening to withdraw affection, the threat of being put in a nursing home and stopping an older person from seeing family or friends.

Financial abuse is another common type of elder abuse and includes incurring bills for which an older person is responsible, stealing money or goods, forcing someone to sign a document such as a will, contract or power of attorney.

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<sup>1</sup> Zelda Quakawoot ‘From the Ocean to the Dusts’, retrieved from <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/respect-for-elders-and-culture>

Physical abuse might include pushing, shoving and rough handling. It can also include improper use of 'restrictive practices' in hospitals and residential care facilities. Sexual abuse includes rape and other unwanted sexual contact and inappropriate touching.

Neglect includes failing to provide someone with such things as food, shelter or medical care. Family members may be responsible for providing such 'necessaries of life' and may receive a social security payment for doing so.<sup>2</sup>

The shocking case of the death of a 77-year-old woman in an uninsulated, unheated shipping container at Mount Lloyd in Tasmania in the middle of winter in 2010 is an extreme example which Sue Leitch described as having all the hallmarks of a classic case of elder abuse.<sup>3</sup> Janet Mackodzi had many of the risk factors of elder abuse, namely poor physical health, dementia and social isolation. Her daughter and son-in-law rejected outside offers of medical help as her health deteriorated, refused offers of a place in a nursing home and other services, and they sold her unit and spent her money.

One thing this case and the legal proceedings and coronial inquest which followed it did was to expose a problem that has had little recognition. Until recently, elder abuse as a serious social problem was hidden from public view and was considered to be largely a private matter. Even today it is underestimated and too often ignored by societies across the world. Janet Mackodzi's case is an extreme example of elder abuse. However, her daughter, a registered nurse and son-in-law, a disability support worker were ordinary people with absolutely no excuse for not appreciating the implications of their conduct.

Elder abuse is under-reported globally. Its extent, the 'dark figure' is difficult to estimate. Just as the dark figure of sexual abuse and family violence is difficult to estimate, so is the dark figure for elder abuse. Criminologists measure the prevalence of sexual abuse and family violence using techniques such as representative victim surveys which help to indicate the extent to which these crime are under-reported. For elderly people, because of such things as social isolation and cognitive impairment, the obstacles to disclosing abuse are even

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Law Reform Commission, Elder Abuse, A National Legal Response (ALRC Report 131), 2017 paras 1.9-1.13.

<sup>3</sup> Peta Carlyon, Elderly woman's shipping container death prompts Tasmanian coroner to call for reform', ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-13/coroner-recommend-elder-abuse-changes-over-container-death/9990776> accessed 9 June 2020.

greater than for victims of sexual and family violence who are not elderly. This means that talking about elder abuse, raising awareness of it is so important. Like domestic violence, it is not a private family matter.

Covid-19 has made us aware of the vulnerability of the aged. How devastating it has been for those in aged care facilities to be denied family visits for more than two months. It was this realisation that prompted us to send flowers from the Government House garden to 61 aged care facilities around the State. I can understand why these measure were put in place but have been concerned to learn that residents in some facilities were unable to access medical care such as regular injections for macular degeneration. In some facilities they were given the option of having the treatment and isolating for two weeks or not having the treatment so they could still mingle with other residents and staff. What a necessarily awful choice! If this had continued it might be characterised as a choice between blindness and solitary confinement.

As the Australian Law Reform Commission reminded us, elder abuse is everybody's business and it is also everybody's responsibility, a responsibility not only to recognise it but to respond to it effectively. This includes knowing what to do if it is suspected. Here the Elder Abuse Prevention Website is an important new tool, as is the Elder Abuse Helpline.

Thank you for inviting me to Talk Against Elder Abuse. Let's hope that next year we will be again Walking Against Elder Abuse as well as talking on World Elder Abuse Day.