

Factors that Impact the Determination by Medical Examiners of Elder Mistreatment as a Cause of Death in Older People

The professionals best equipped to determine that elder abuse caused an individual's death are medical examiners and coroners. However, medical examiners rarely deem elder mistreatment as a cause of death; this is likely due to a lack of research and evidence to support this determination. In response, this project was undertaken to begin to develop primary data and a literature base on the topic of death due to elder mistreatment.

Lead Agency:

National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs

Agency Mission:

NIJ is the research, development, and evaluation agency of the U.S. Department of Justice and is dedicated to researching crime control and justice issues. NIJ provides objective, independent, evidence-based knowledge and tools to meet the challenges of crime and justice, particularly at the State and local levels.

Principle Investigator:

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Partner Agencies:

U.S. Department of Justice's Elder Justice and Nursing Home Initiative

General Description:

The professionals best equipped to determine that elder abuse caused an individual's death are medical examiners and coroners. However, medical examiners rarely deem elder mistreatment as a cause of death; this is likely due to a lack of research and evidence to support this determination. In response, this project was undertaken to begin to develop primary data and a literature base on the topic of death due to elder mistreatment. The research team conducted four distinct projects to evaluate these three aspects of death determination by medical examiners:

- Phase I was a survey exploring the views of medical examiners, which showed that medical examiners infrequently determine elder mistreatment as a cause of death in older decedents even when the signs are there to do so.
- Phase II evaluated scene investigation and medical records and toxicology by studying the medical examiners case conferences and case records. This study showed that while the medical examiners are expert at performing autopsies, interpreting toxicology and determining the cause and manner of death, they are

not versed (nor should they be expected to be) in the standard of care of older persons.

- Phase III was a study of the scene investigation, which showed that the scene investigation is not necessarily geared to the detection of forensic markers and risk factors for elder mistreatment and that the training of investigators in the specifics of elder mistreatment may be helpful.
- Phase IV explored autopsy and physical examination findings, which found that in cases where dementia was documented or pressure ulcers were present, the decedents were more likely to have been contacted by Adult Protective Services prior to their death.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

This project was the first to examine the ability of medical examiners to determine whether someone died of elder mistreatment rather than the natural health complications and degeneration associated with old age. The results of each of these studies offers pilot data that inform readers of the factors that account for the low rate of determination of elder mistreatment as a cause of death in older persons. These studies not only increase understanding of elder mistreatment death determinations but also lay the groundwork for future research by a wide variety of disciplines including prosecutors, police officers, protective service workers and medical examiners.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

As the American elderly population expands exponentially over the coming decades, law enforcement will need new tools and knowledge to detect signs of abuse of these members of this vulnerable population. These two projects lay the groundwork for the production and communication of such guidance.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

This research expands our knowledge of the signs of elder abuse and the ability (or inability) of medical and criminal justice personnel to detect such abuse in this population. These findings will lead to an increased ability of caretakers and law enforcement to detect and respond to these crimes, which are currently under-reported and go largely unaddressed.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

This project demonstrated the need for training for medical examiners in the area of elder mistreatment, as many are currently unable to distinguish between signs of elder abuse and other natural byproducts of aging. Such training would greatly increase detection of homicides of elderly individuals.