

## **ELDER ABUSE**

### *Grievance*

**MS C.M. ROWE (Belmont)** [9.09 am]: My grievance this morning is to the Minister for Seniors and Ageing. My electorate of Belmont, like many others, has a significant number of seniors. Many seniors in my community have shared with me how vulnerable they feel as they grow older. This is for various reasons, including declining health and a lack of mobility, and it is often exacerbated by their intense loneliness and isolation. One of my constituents and a good friend, who is a woman in her late 70s, told me recently that she can go a whole week without speaking to or seeing any other person. This vulnerability can lead to seniors becoming the target of elder abuse. As our population ages, elder abuse is becoming an increasingly prevalent issue and its devastating effects ripple through families and the community. It impacts on the mental, physical and financial wellbeing of not only the victim, but also their families and friends. Unfortunately, we know that elder abuse encompasses abusive behaviour within relationships of trust that causes harm or distress to an older person, and that the majority of instances of elder abuse are financial and perpetrated by a family member. The complexities of reporting a crime perpetrated by the people whom an elderly person loves and relies on, as well as a lack of awareness regarding what constitutes elder abuse, means that many victims of elder abuse are sadly prevented from coming forward. Writing for ABC online in June this year, Professor Joseph Ibrahim from Monash University labelled elder abuse “the perfect crime”. The professor wrote —

#### **Elder abuse is the perfect crime.**

The victims rarely complain, and if they do their complaints are scarcely heard. If anyone listens, action is unusual. And then they die.

More optimistically, the professor wrote —

Change requires leadership, persistence and concerted efforts ...

...

We must commit to action to hold ourselves, our parliament, aged care, legal and social structures to account.

During Seniors Week in November this year, the minister will take part in an elder abuse forum in my electorate, which I am really pleased about. Community forums are a really fantastic way to educate and discuss the various forms of elder abuse that exist and how elder abuse can be identified and, most importantly, reported. Quite clearly, we need action across governments, banks and other financial institutions, and health and legal services. Ahead of the forum, I would like to ask the minister what the state is doing to address and combat this blight on our society and how the McGowan government intends to work with the federal government and other jurisdictions in a coordinated and effective manner.

**MR M.P. MURRAY (Collie–Preston — Minister for Seniors and Ageing)** [9.12 am]: I thank the member for Belmont for her grievance. This is certainly an issue that has become more prevalent in our society—in some ways our greedy society—in which people take shortcuts. When people first talk about elder abuse they tend to think of physical abuse, but there are so many ways in which elder abuse can be perpetrated, including by people telling their parents that they cannot see the grandkids, or taking their mum’s credit card to do her shopping and putting their own shopping on the card as well. That is absolutely elder abuse, because the parent never gave permission for that to happen. People have to understand that that is just not on. The member mentioned social isolation. As our cities get bigger and density increases, people are finding that they do not talk to each other from day-to-day like they used to, and they have nowhere to go to express their concerns about what is happening to them.

I am very pleased to say that we have been working very hard—the Attorney General has led the charge Australia-wide—on legislation to help stamp out this awful elder abuse. It is estimated that between two and 10 per cent of older Western Australians—10 000 to 40 000 people—have experienced some form of elder abuse. The impact of elder abuse is broad, and if those figures were cases of just physical abuse, we would be horrified. But let us look more deeply at and be more concerned about what is happening in the community. The state government has not sat on its hands with regard to this issue. We are working very hard behind the scenes. The government continues to support vital on-ground services such as Advocare and the Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre, which operates an older people’s rights service. The government has a five-year service agreement with these groups. That gives them security and some continuity to work out what should be said and what can be done. I am very pleased to say that Advocare funding has been increased by \$150 000 a year to operate the elder abuse helpline. Every time there is an article in the paper or a grievance, the helpline explodes. More people are made aware that there is somewhere to go to about this issue and they call the helpline. We also hold forums, as the member mentioned, and I congratulate her on holding it in her area; it is a very important event. It comes down to people being aware that they have somewhere to go.

The member spoke about isolation. If someone's only social outing is to walk out of the house to the letterbox, to walk back inside again and sit down and watch telly, then that is not the best way to spend the final years of their life. They may also be having difficulties with financial or mental abuse—their children are perhaps suggesting that they should go into a home. Those sorts of things happen regularly, but now there is somewhere to go, and we thank Advocare for the work it does. Even though the federal government announced at the election that it was working in this area and would provide a helpline, it was disappointing that it then diverted that service to Advocare. We are paying for that helpline; the federal government never put any money into that service! That is a blight on the federal government and it should come to the party and help some of those groups financially. I am not talking about helping the state government, but helping other groups to come out of the woodwork and help vulnerable Western Australians. I call on the federal government to pull its weight in this area. We are doing our bit, and more can be done at any time. If the federal government were to provide more funding, that would give us more chance of connecting with the community.

Legal Aid WA is also an important partner in this work, operating a seniors rights and advocacy service that helps older Western Australians to safeguard their rights and prevent elder abuse. The state government has committed \$2.3 million towards elder abuse prevention initiatives and training. It is important that this training funding is used for the police and in the banks. Those people are able to recognise an elder abuse problem and do something about it, and that is a skill in itself. A son or a daughter might bring their elderly mother into a bank, who is not quite sure where she is. They might then ask her to sign documents here and there, and then, generally, when the other sibling finds out that the bank account is empty, there is not much that can be done about it. Recently, I was told that one of the banks has an elder abuse detection system in which it set up a forum so that an individual does not make the call. It is good to see that the banks are working very hard on this. Sometimes the police are called out to a home because they have been told that some sort of elder abuse is occurring there, but when they get there it is very quiet and they are told that everything is all right. Quite often, the parent has been pushed for money and physically abused, but they will not make a complaint against their own kid because they do not want to see them go to court. If we provide that training to police and banking staff, we can cut off that behaviour very early, which is something we intend to do. Every professional out there should be aware of these problems, whether it be with the writing of wills or any of those things that can be skewed against the parent. If an elderly parent has not had help in these matters, it does not matter what anyone says—it is elder abuse.

In political circles, we invariably have people coming to us and asking what we have done to prevent elder abuse. It is great to see that the member is holding that elder abuse forum. I would love to come along to it. This area is certainly something that the government is working on. If local members do not help in this regard, that becomes part of the problem. It is great to see that the member for Belmont and her community are working very hard to make sure that elder abuse is brought to the forefront of people's minds and dealt with. Thank you very much.