

17 November 2017

INQUIRY INTO ELDER ABUSE – LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Introduction

Silver Chain Group (SCG) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Select Committee into Elder Abuse and we applaud the Western Australian government for its commitment to safeguarding older persons who may be vulnerable to abuse.

The subject matter is complex and multi-faceted and we have therefore restricted our response to areas where we believe we can make the most informed and helpful contributions to the feedback process. We recognise that elder abuse may be more common in institutional settings where clients are removed from their familiar environments and community supports however we restrict our commentary to our area of expertise – in community support.

The opinions we present within this submission reflect Silver Chain's experience in providing more than 1.85 million hours of world-class health and aged care across Australia in 2016 – 2017. We are one of the largest in-home health and community care providers in Australia. With over 4,000 staff and 350 volunteers, Silver Chain assists over 90,000 people in Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales to achieve their wish to remain in their own homes and communities every year.

In Western Australia, we are one of the largest providers of in-home care, providing services across metropolitan, regional and remote settings. Our services extend to some of Western Australia's most isolated communities and challenging service delivery contexts. Every year in WA we provide over one million hours of care to help people live well at home as they age. With over 2,900 local staff, we are committed to Western Australia and the protection of the safety, rights and dignity of our clients.

The Unique Role of Service Providers

Silver Chain Group takes seriously its duty of care to protect the safety and respect the rights and dignity of all clients particularly those who are vulnerable. Without exception, they have a fundamental right to freedom from abuse and exploitation. We have defined abuse as any pattern of behaviour that results in physical, emotional, sexual, verbal, social or economic violation of human rights.

We believe that service providers of in-home care are in a unique position and can function as an 'early warning/detection' mechanism of elder abuse. The advent of consumer direct care has given rise to a more holistic approach to service delivery and the consideration of factors beyond the health status and functional ability of an individual. In this regard service providers often have a deep understanding of a client's social situation and are well positioned to identify subtle changes that may indicate a potentially elder abuse within the home environment.

Providers seek to engage with the client, carers, family and their support network to gain a full understanding of social dynamics to enable effective, person centred service delivery. This provides an opportunity for staff to identify risk factors and potential elder abuse, providing staff are appropriately trained and supported by the systems, supervision and leadership necessary to enable rapid response.

Our ongoing presence within the home setting, relationships with clients and assistance, including personal care, subsequently enables us to identify signs of abuse. The sometimes-subtle nature of elder abuse does however mean that it can elude detection. Furthermore, identification of elder abuse is frequently hindered in situations where it involves partners, family, friends and neighbours due to an unwillingness to acknowledge the abuse by the person experiencing abuse. These situations therefore require a very considered and sensitive approach.

Training and Supporting Staff

Providing staff with adequate training, equipping them with skills and support to enable them to deal competently with situations of real or potential client abuse is of vital importance. This includes clearly demarcating the role of care providers and providing them with strategies dependent on the urgency and severity of the abuse.

The impacts of elder abuse can be profound, not only for the person experiencing abuse but also for staff in their caring roles. The respective manager/supervisor therefore fulfils a key role in ensuring that staff are supported and additional professional external support is organised if required.

Clearly defined escalation pathways available to managers/supervisors are based on the severity and urgency of the abuse. This ensures that the situation is dealt with in an effective manner and can include linking in with advocacy services such as Advocare, involving our dedicated Client Liaison Officer or if required involving police. Maintaining confidentiality and treating all involved parties with dignity and respect is essential to deal with these sensitive situations.

Reporting of elder abuse

Reporting of elder abuse is compulsory in Silver Chain Group and by recording all instances in our incident management system we ensure transparency and enable effective management. Every instance is tracked, and included in our organisational excellence reporting which are distributed to the various divisions. Furthermore, the Chief Executive Officer notifies the Silver Chain Group Board of all allegations and provides advice throughout the process and reports on all outcomes and recommendations of any investigation.

We are happy to share further detail on our framework if that is believed to be of benefit by the select committee.

Contributing to the evidence base and best practices

Our collective understanding of the prevalence of elder abuse currently suffers from a lack of evidence as identified by the Australian Law Reform Commission in their 2016 inquiry into elder abuse. A lack of robust evidence is inhibiting effective policy responses and we therefore subscribe to the recommendation for a national study of elder abuse to be conducted.

We believe in-home service providers are uniquely placed to make a material contribution to the evidence base on elder abuse and enable more effective policy responses due to our interaction with elders and formal reporting mechanisms in place. This does however require the resolution of the current differences in conceptualisation of elder abuse and the adoption of a consistent measurement framework across service providers.

Furthermore, a high degree of fragmentation can be observed in terms of prevention approaches as identified in the 2017 report: *Elder Abuse, Understanding issues, frameworks and responses* by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. We believe that in home service providers are uniquely placed to contribute to prevention and amelioration approaches, an area currently suffering from limited knowledge as identified by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Cognisant of differences in organisational contexts we believe that the exchange of best practices between service providers

can prove to be beneficial in the further development of effective prevention and amelioration approaches.

We recognise that elder abuse is a significant issue affecting Australian society and are committed to contributing to initiatives that reduce its occurrence, aid in its detection and encourage the development of best-practice in this area. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further information or support at any time.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this important enquiry.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Melanie Kiely".

Melanie Kiely
Executive General Manager – Social Care