

Report finds abuse in US nursing homes goes unreported and unpunished

Physical and sexual abuse of nursing home residents by nursing home staff in the USA often goes unreported and unpunished, according to a new government study. The study was done by the US Government Accounting Office (GAO), an investigative arm of the US Congress. In the study, investigators reviewed state and federal regulations and studied abuse reports in three states—Illinois, Georgia, and Pennsylvania.

About 1.5 million elderly or disabled Americans live in nursing homes, which for their services receive more than \$58 billion a year from state and federal health insurance plans. The US Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), a division of the US Department of Health and Human Services, sets the standards that nursing homes must meet to qualify for federal funding. CMS contracts with state agencies, called state survey agencies, to certify that local nursing homes meet those standards.

The GAO investigators found that, although CMS regulations require nursing homes to report allegations of abuse promptly to the state survey agencies, they often do not, and when incidents are reported, the reports were often delayed for days or even weeks. "These delays compromise the quality of available evidence and hinder

investigations", they said.

In one case reviewed by the investigators, an elderly woman told



Need for adequate protection

a nurse that she had been raped in the nursing home. The nurse recorded the allegation in the resident's chart but did not notify the nursing home management or state authorities. The allegation came to the attention of authorities 2 months later, when the resident was admitted to hospital for unrelated reasons and told hospital officials of the attack. The full report: *Nursing Homes: more can be done to protect residents* can be accessed at <http://www.gao.gov>.

The investigators identified a number of reasons why abuse so often went unreported. In some cases, residents or family members fear retribution by the staff or the nursing home management, they said. "According to one law enforcement official, family members are

sometimes fearful that the resident will be asked to leave the home and are troubled by the prospect of finding a new place for the resident to live."

Residents and family members also often do not know where they can report incidents of abuse, the investigators found. Staff members who witness or learn of abuse are also often reluctant to report incidents because they "fear losing their jobs or facing recrimination from coworkers and nursing home management", the investigators said.

Prosecution of abuse is also hampered by the failing memories of the victims and other elderly residents who may have witnessed the attacks. In one case, a victim's roommate was able to identify the attacker during the investigation but was unable to do so again during the trial, which was held 5 months later, the investigators reported.

The investigators said that state oversight agencies rarely punished nursing homes for failing to protect residents adequately from abuse. In the three states surveyed, state officials cited 26 nursing homes for abuse-related deficiencies, such as failing to report abuse or failing to report abuse in a timely manner, but in only one case did they impose a monetary penalty.

Michael McCarthy

Sex-for-food scandal in West African refugee camps

A bleak picture of sexual exploitation in refugee camps in three war-torn West African countries has emerged from an interim report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children, UK.

In the report, young girls tell of exchanging sex for money, a handful of fruit, or a bar of soap. Parents are said to turn a blind eye because sexual exploitation has become a "mechanism of survival" in many camps in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia.

Published on Feb 27, the report drew cries of outrage from West African governments and international organisations. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan ordered an urgent inquiry and said the organisation had "zero tolerance" for abuses.

Investigators interviewed 1500 adults and children in October and November, 2001, for the report. They said they could not independently verify the stories they were told, and the names of those allegedly implicated have not been released. The investigators received allegations of abuse against 67 individuals from more than 40 groups. Agencies possibly implicated include the UNHCR, UN peacekeeping forces, international

and local non-governmental organisations, and government agencies. The UNHCR has now sent a team of experts to the region to investigate further.

"The exchange of sex for money or gifts appears to be widespread and the majority of children consulted said they knew of at least one other child involved in such an exchange", the report said. Most of the children involved are girls aged between 13 and 18 years, and most of the allegations concern male national staff. "It's difficult to escape the trap of those people; they use the food as bait to get you to have sex with them", one adolescent in Liberia told investigators.

There are hundreds of thousands of refugees in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia. For decades, people have crisscrossed the region's borders, trying to keep one step ahead of the guns as wars raged in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Despite the end of a seven-year civil war in Liberia in 1996, there is still fighting between rebel troops and government forces in the north.

The report also contained allegations of sexual exploitation by UN peacekeepers in Sierra Leone. The troops played a key role in ending the war, which was officially declared over in January, and in disarming

Ghana's new budget draws cheers and jeers in the health sector

Ghana's 2002 budget, presented by Finance Minister Osafo Maafo on Feb 22, may have drawn criticism but it holds promise for the poor. "Raising the typical small scale farmer's productivity and supporting his efforts with enhanced facilities . . . constitute the core of the [ruling party's] strategy for breaking out of the cycle of poverty", said Maafo. Three out of five Ghanaians live below the poverty line.

Maafo said that last year the country saved US\$190 million from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, which will go into poverty reduction. But outspoken former Deputy Finance Minister, now Minority Spokesperson on Finance, Moses Asaga, described the budget as lacking focus and new ideas to move the economy forward. He strongly criticised the government for joining HIPC, which he claims makes Ghana's economy solely dependent on International Monetary Fund and World Bank donations. Asaga pointed out that under HIPC, the government would remove all subsidies on agriculture inputs and utilities, which hurts the poor most.

Shortly afterwards, World Bank Country Director, Peter Harold, announced the cancellation of \$3.7 billion of Ghana's \$6 billion external debt for reaching the HIPC decision point. He explained that

the conditions attached to the package require the government to channel the relief into the poverty alleviation programme and urged Ghana to use the money it would have earmarked for debt servicing to better the lot of Ghanaians.

The 2002 budget represents the first year of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS), which has earmarked health, education, and agriculture in four of Ghana's 10 regions to benefit from poverty alleviation funds under HIPC. The Health Ministry has however recommended including deprived districts outside the targeted regions and taking out endowed districts, bringing to 65 the number of deprived districts identified out of the 110.

Acting Director General of the Ghana Health Service, Sam Adjei, said that "when HIPC money is made available it will go to the Community based Health Planning and Services [CHPS] initiative because CHPS is central to the GPRS". Adjei estimates that about \$40 million per year is needed for implementing the strategy, much of which goes into expanding training institutions; implementing the exemptions policy for the aged, children younger than 5 years, and pregnant women; establishing a health insurance scheme in every community running

CHPS; and improving communication.

In a television interview, former Finance Minister Kwesi Botchwey, admitted that in hindsight, it is clear that health, like education, did not receive adequate domestic funding as key sectors of the economy. John E Williams, Clinical Research Officer at the Navrongo Health Research Centre, lamented that unlike in 2000, this year's budget does not mention CHPS, which is designed to tackle rural health problems.

Despite the criticisms, the 2002 budget seems to respond to WHO's recommendations that developing countries increase domestic funding for health care. In 2000, the government budgeted 320.1 billion Cedis, (about \$46 million) for health; this year the figure has more than doubled to 699.4 billion Cedis.

Drawing inspiration from the WHO global plan adopted on Feb 2, Ghana is targeting the diseases of poverty—HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, guinea worm, reproductive and child health, expanded programme of immunisation, and emergency care—as the seven specific areas of health service delivery, giving the poor something to cheer about.

Santuah F Niagia

thousands of rebel fighters. There are some 17 000 troops still stationed there. "The position of power, wealth, and status enjoyed by peacekeeping personnel gives them the ability to do as they wish. In Freetown, nationals spoke about the behaviour of the 'boys in blue helmets' with a feeling of helplessness and sadness", the report said.

The consequences of the sexual exploitation include teenage pregnancies, reduced educational opportunities for the girl-mothers, and a high risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The UNHCR and Save the Children have drawn up a plan of action to tackle the problem. Measures include a review of the layout of the camps to give refugees more privacy, and improvements in the distribution of aid to make sure it is not used as a tool of exploitation.

Paul Nolan, child protection manager at Save the Children in London, added that the agency was already taking measures on the ground, in coordination with other non-governmental organisations, to increase security for children.

"I think the sense of shock in some ways comes from the fact that we are getting direct testimony from children who have been through traumatic experiences. This gives the study the impact it has. I think the study

addresses an issue that has been a concern for people", Nolan told *The Lancet*.

However, he said that he did not think the agency's codes of conduct needed to be redrafted. "They are very clear . . . What we need to do is make sure that these codes of conduct are being operated as stringently as possible", he said.

Although not named in the report, UNICEF was also disturbed by the allegations. "It is totally outrageous that humanitarian workers betrayed the trust of children", Margarita Amodeo, head of communications for West and Central Africa, told *The Lancet*. "The fact that we are not implicated does not mean that we will not call for a prompt response. We will not tolerate impunity for the perpetrators", she said. UNICEF is also working to improve child security in refugee camps. "We are preparing a child-friendly space, with an area to play, with recreational toys and educational toys and we will be finding teachers among the displaced", she said.

UNHCR and Save the Children also recommended that the channels of communication between the refugees and senior UNHCR members be strengthened so that abuses could be reported easily.

Clar Ni Chonghaile