

ELDER ABUSE

Grievance

MS C.M. ROWE (Belmont) [9.30 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Seniors and Ageing. I thank him for taking this grievance this morning. I wish to begin by acknowledging his outstanding work in his various portfolios. I particularly want to note his dedication to seniors right across Western Australia.

I grieve today on behalf of some of the state's most vulnerable individuals—those who have experienced the scourge of elder abuse. Elder abuse is one of the most insidious crimes. Perpetrators prey on elderly victims in a variety of ways that can leave considerable physical, psychological, social and financial damage. These crimes can often be hidden and go unreported due to shame, fear or a lack of access to legal representation. It is estimated that up to 49 000 older people are at risk of experiencing neglect or abuse in WA each year. This is a horrifying statistic. The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study surveyed 7 000 Australians over the age of 65 and found that nearly 15 per cent of older Australians had experienced elder abuse of some kind. In addition, a survey of 3 400 Australians aged between 18 and 64 indicated that over 17 per cent of younger Australians had concerns about someone they knew experiencing elder abuse. The most common form of abuse that the survey identified was psychological abuse. The most common perpetrators were the adult children of the elderly person involved. It is devastating that the most common perpetrators of elder abuse are family relations. This can make reporting elder abuse near on impossible for the victim. This is explored in “Barriers to disclosing elder abuse and taking action in Australia”, an article published in the *Journal of Family Violence*. This article suggests that victims of elder abuse are often afraid to report their experiences out of fear of potential consequences. The parental bond between a victim and their abuser often prevents the victim from speaking to others and can also be a source of shame and stigma.

In December last year, I hosted a seniors forum in my electorate of Belmont. I sincerely thank the minister for attending, along with the CEO of the Council on the Ageing Western Australia, Christine Allen, and COTA ambassador Professor Bob Zeigler. More than 75 local Belmont seniors attended the forum, at which COTA provided a comprehensive presentation before questions were taken. I received very positive feedback about the event from attendees. They found the information provided to be of great use and truly appreciated the willingness of COTA and the minister to attend and take questions. The warm reception that this forum achieved indicates to me that more needs to be done to support seniors in our community. There is a clear appetite for information on elder rights and support services. There needs to be greater support and assistance for victims to access when they are experiencing abuse. Victims need a service that is accessible, discreet, supportive and effective. I ask the minister what this government is doing to ensure the safety and security of seniors in our community and how our government is addressing elder abuse in WA.

MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury — Minister for Seniors and Ageing) [9.33 am]: I would like to thank the member for Belmont not only for her grievance, but also for her passion for seniors in our community and the issue of elder abuse. I was in the member's electorate in December 2021. It was a great opportunity to discuss a raft of issues and programs and, even more importantly, it was a great opportunity to talk with about 100 seniors about what it means to live well as we grow older. Out of that discussion, the notion of happiness was raised as being part of living well. There is nothing more important as we grow older than to do so with a sense of fulfilment, connection and happiness. Central to that, of course, is the importance of relationships and connection. That connection can be with partners, friends, children and, importantly, with grandchildren and great-grandchildren. When those relationships are based on strong trust and boundaries, they are very fulfilling in helping people to achieve that sense of happiness. When there is an abuse of trust and power, we start to see the notions of exploitation, vulnerability, physical abuse, neglect and not relating to the person as a person but potentially relating to the person as somebody to be manipulated or patted on the head and forgotten about. One of the great challenges as we grow older is that as we age, we can easily fade into the background and become isolated. Isolation and loneliness are two of the key indicators of long-term unhappiness, poor health and increasing decline.

Elder abuse can develop over a long period, but it can also develop over a short acute period. As the member indicated, the perpetrators can be family members, including children, and it can be insidious in the way it develops. It can be about not having enough time to really think about the needs of an older person through to thinking, “I could well make better use of my mum's house than she can as she becomes more vulnerable.” It gets reframed into caring for the person when it is really about extracting equity and looking at residential care options. All too often that can happen earlier in life than it needs to, and people lose independence and become isolated.

I want to acknowledge the work of my predecessor, Hon Mick Murray, who initiated the McGowan government's *WA strategy to respond to the abuse of older people (elder abuse) 2019–2029*. We have just released a progress report that the member would be very interested in, which looks at a summary of actions from 2019 through to 2020. It is a 10-year strategy—from 2019 to 2029. I am pleased to say that significant progress has been made towards the strategy's goal of ensuring that all Western Australians are safe, respected and valued, and live free from elder abuse. It is a complex social, health and human rights issue. As members would know, the abuse of older people

can take many forms—financial, psychological, physical, sexual and emotional. This government is working hard to address those challenges and to confront the abuse of older people in Western Australia. It is absolutely necessary that the government works with stakeholders, older people and the broader community in helping to address it.

The progress report shows the work that is being done by the government, the community services sector and the private sector. I am very pleased that many aspects of the private sector have come on board, particularly the financial and banking sectors. It also identifies that future actions should be responsive to new challenges, opportunities and priorities. I acknowledge the strong collaboration and partnership that the government has with the community. The action plan within the strategy's principles include —

1. Dignity, autonomy and freedom from abuse are human rights.
2. All older Western Australians are entitled to be equally valued and respected regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion or impairment.
3. All responses to elder abuse prioritise the safety, wellbeing, dignity and autonomy of older Western Australians, regardless of where they reside.
4. An older person's choices and preferences are fundamental and should be respected.

Since the launch of the strategy in November 2019, the government has committed more than \$6 million to elder abuse initiatives. That includes \$2.3 million to establish the first vulnerable seniors peak body in Western Australia; continuing the WA elder abuse helpline and information service; providing statewide advocacy and legal services; raising awareness—the most important component—and delivering education programs; and undertaking research into the prevalence of elder abuse and the mistreatment of older Aboriginal people in Western Australia. An additional \$4 million has been made available to Legal Aid Western Australia over four years to establish Elder Rights WA to support seniors and combat elder abuse. That service will be delivered statewide. The Financial Elder Abuse Roundtable, co-hosted by Bankwest and the Department of Communities, brought together financial services, corporate, government and community sectors to raise awareness about the scale and impact of elder abuse and share best practice. There are many initiatives and I draw the member's attention to this document, which I think she will find very valuable.

I would like to again thank the member for Belmont for her grievance and I trust that this information goes some way to assure her of our response. This is an ongoing response that will take longer than 10 years, but we have an opportunity now to lay the foundations to address elder abuse in our community in a positive way. I thank the member for her grievance.