

# Understanding the Causes of Financial Elder Abuse

## Aging Peter Pans Target Parents with Fiscal Abuse

By **Cathy Cress, MSW**

**F**inancial elder abuse is the crime of the 21st century. This statement was made by Mary Twomey, director of the San Francisco Consortium for Elder Abuse Prevention. Why is this dark cloud of crime looming over the heads of older people? Who is the main suspect?

The crime itself—financial elder abuse—has not yet hit the radar of the mass media, but a national incidence study by the Administration on Aging in 1996 indicated that financial abuse was the cause of 40% of 551,000 cases of elder abuse reported, indicating this is a enormous crime.<sup>1</sup> In a 1994 study from North Carolina, 46% of the elderly victims were identified as casualties of financial abuse. A Canadian study estimated 50% of all elder abuse involved material exploitation.<sup>2</sup> In an article on elder financial abuse, based on the Santa Clara County, Calif., FAST teams results, published in the *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, the authors indicate that the number of elderly who are victims of financial abuse may be as high as 5 million victims per year.<sup>1</sup> Geriatric care managers who work with dysfunctional families of older people often encounter fiscal abuse as part of their case management assessment process.

If financial abuse of the elderly has reached such epic proportions, why is it so underreported? The void might be

ascribed to a bias held by the agencies that gather the crime statistics. Criminal elder abuse has been defined in terms of bodily assault as opposed to financial abuse. This possible skewing is understandable as assault is certainly more threatening and better recognized. Thus, financial abuse has taken a second seat in the crime reporting.<sup>1</sup>

The lack of statistics for financial elder abuse may also reflect the older victims' reluctance to report the crime. Financial abuse against the elderly may be underreported because the elderly victim is embarrassed by the crime.<sup>1</sup> Like a rape victim, older people may feel they were at fault and even more accountable because they were mentally confused, allowing themselves to be preyed upon. A second reason that older victims may hold back information could be the fear that the care they are receiving may be withdrawn by the very person who may be fiscally abusing them, a case of Dracula at the blood bank. Finally, it may be the the older victim and the perpetrator of the financial abuse may be locked in a lifelong symbiotic relationship that is reaching its final stage. The name of the perpetrator may be metaphorically an Aging Peter Pan.

Why Peter Pan? Well let's look at James M. Barrie's timeless character. Peter was a serial stealer. He stole not just the first Wendy but several subse-

quent Wendy's in the enchanting tale about children reaching Neverland. Peter Pan stole Wendy over and over again—coming back each time to get a new mother when she grew up. Peter Pan, as we all know from the classic, had no sense of time. He thought that he had just been back when several decades had passed. Each new Wendy came to Neverland to cook and clean for Peter and those infamous lost boys leaving them to play and duel with the villainous Captain Hook, who in some interpretations of the tale, may have been a symbol for his father. What we absolutely know is that he never grew up and he never separated from his mother, Wendy. Wendy returned home to grow up but Peter returned over and over to get a mother replacement.

As the crime of financial elder abuse has grown to huge proportions, ►

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it has been theorized that the very perpetrators of the crime might be the elderly victim's own family members. It is further suggested in this article that the perpetrator may be a son who is now a baby boomer and has never grown up. The perpetrator may be an Aging Peter Pan.

This article presents the working hypothesis that adult children in their late 40's to early 60's have been increasingly living at home with their aging parents and are dependent of these aging relations. The baby boomer son may be taking fiscal and perhaps physical advantage of his aging parents. Thus, the Aging Peter Pan syndrome. This syndrome may have resulted from several sociological triggers, including:

- Aging Peter Pan syndrome results from present day longer lifespans and increased dependency of elders who live into their 80's, 90's and 100's with heightened chronic disease, dependency and need to rely on adult children, who may be very needy themselves
- Aging Peter Pan culture has arisen from the "me" generation of the 1970's that was egocentric and not forced to create a career or keep a job, resulting in dependent, often unemployed adult children
- Aging Peter Pans arose from the Dr. Spock-style permissiveness in childrearing in the 1940's and 1950's
- Aging Peter Pan arose from the drug culture of the 1960's and 1970's where young people became impaired over time resulting in dependence on their parents
- Aging Peter Pan arose from the high real estate market that grew in California in the 1990's where elders became house rich and therefore vulnerable to their dependent adult children

A tentative definition of Aging Peter Pan would be that he is male, white, and in his 50's. He is presently dependent on his aging parents and

lives at home. He is alcohol- and/or drug-dependent and has a history of mental illness.

### A Look at the Aging Population

The first possible trigger to the Aging Peter Pan syndrome may be the longer lifespan of the elderly victims, resulting in prolonged dependency on someone to help him or her with the activities of daily living, as they become more incapacitated.

We know now that the fastest growing population in the United States is over 85. This population is 31 times larger than it was in 1900 and represents what we call the old/old. The young/old population, those over 65, has grown eight times larger than it was in 1900. By 2030, there will be 70 million older people—twice the number in 1997.

This aging tidal wave, especially when the group reaches over 85, are labeled "frail elders." A frail elder is someone who is frequently dependent on the care of someone else, especially their family members. These younger family members help the frail elder with what we call activities of daily living. These old/old people are dependent because of the effects of the chronic illness (Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, cancer, heart disease, etc.).

The dependence of frail elders causes a great strain on families. According to a survey done by the National Alliance for Caregiving and the American Association of Retired Persons, 22.4 million or nearly one in four family members has cared for an elderly family member over 50 in the last 12 months.

Because of older people's lengthened lifespan, family members spend increasing amounts of time in both intergenerational and caregiving roles. Some historical perspective on the enormous increase of this role demonstrates the growing stress for intergenerational families. In 1800, a 60-year-old woman

had a 3% chance of having a living parent, who she would care for. By 1980 she had an 80% chance of having that parent under her care.<sup>3</sup> This places an enormous burden on families.

Families not only care for their elderly family members but they often have multiple older people depending upon them. This overwhelming responsibility means that baby boomers, the tsunami of new aging, can expect to have 30 more years of shared aging with their parents.<sup>3</sup>

So, we find newly minted aging caregivers caring for their elderly parents. This conjoint aging along with hands-on, and at times exhausting, caregiving, is a double whammy never expected for some aging baby boomers.

The result of caring for multiple parents is increased time in caregiving. According to the National Alliance for Caregiving, the average family member spends a whopping 18 hours a week caring for elderly family members. This might mean taking the older person to the doctor, helping with shopping, or doing personal care. Not only are family members, who are usually on the cusp of aging themselves, doing caregiving tasks but they are working as well. However, their jobs are affected by their caregiving responsibilities.

According to a study by Andrew Scharlach a researcher and professor at the University of California at Berkeley, 57% of all managers took time off for parent care responsibilities and 40% of all caregivers were absent at least once in a two-month period due to eldercare responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> Although two-thirds of all family caregivers are employed, the payoff of their caregiving is they leave early, get to work late, and are under an enormous amount of strain.

This result is heightened emotional stress for family caregivers and a feeling of being extremely overwhelmed. The consequence can be mental health problems for anyone including those caregivers who are

mentally stable. However some family caregivers cannot bear the stress of caregiving because of their own mental health problems and their own dependence on their parents.

Aging family members cared for by dependent adult children, who have mental health problems and who may be unemployed, may be cared for by an Aging Peter Pan.

### **Causes of Financial Elder Abuse**

There are several possible causes of Aging Peter Syndrome. One likelihood is the Aging Peter Pan culture arose from the “me” generation of the 1970’s. This post Beatle, post Vietnam, post New Age philosophy age group was egocentric, not forced to create career or keep a job, resulting in a small portion of dependent, often-unemployed adult children, who “dropped out” and never rejoined society.

Charmaine Spencer, adjunct professor at Simon Fraser University’s Gerontology Research Center, says three conditions must be in place for financial abuse to take place:

- Need or greed caused by financial pressures related to unemployment, bankruptcy, or divorce
- The opportunity to do it (created by some family members by cutting off family ties from the rest of the family)
- A false sense of entitlement (I am owed this money)

### **A False Sense of Entitlement**

William Coulson, director of research at the Council of Ethnopsychology in Comtche, Calif., squarely lays the blame for elder abuse at the foot of the human potential movement.<sup>5</sup>

Coulson was a colleague of Abraham Maslow, founder of the human potential movement. Coulson says that Maslow renounced the movement at the end of his life. According to Coulson, Maslow’s revisionist thinking came in part from experiences in his own family. He had raised a daughter

who married four times and was involved with Abby Hoffman in the 1960’s. Coulson posits that Maslow decided he himself had given his daughter “the tools for her own misconduct.” Maslow believed that he had made her a part of an entirely selfish generation—a generation with a sense of entitlement. Coulson goes on to suggest that Maslow believed that his experiment—the human potential movement—was the reverse of what civilization had done for thousands of years, which is to live within rigid social norms that had govern the proper conduct in a family. The human potential movement was one way that Maslow believed he had broken down these norms.

Maslow believed that he had spawned the “me” generation by professing that society should move towards the “aggridant individual”—someone who should increase himself or aggrandize himself, thus moves towards self-fulfillment spawning the self-actualization movement.

Coulson goes on to postulate that what frequently irritates this self-centered individual, the Aging Peter Pan, is his parents, which of course is a typical adolescent projection. So, in the Aging Peter Pan, we see men and women in their 50’s still acting like adolescents, angry at their parents, and exhibiting one of the three main conditions for elder financial abuse—a false sense of entitlement, according to Spencer.

### **Childrearing Gone Awry**

Our whole method of parenting in the United States changed in the 1940’s and 1950’s. A part of the revisionist approach to raising children was certainly due to Dr. Benjamin’s Spock’s book, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, published in 1948. Spock espoused more permissive parenting to the post-World War II mothers and fathers of the young children who would, eventually, become the baby boomers at the beginning of the 21st century. This permissive

parenting style may have resulted in some individuals, raised in this unfettered fashion, committing financial elder abuse 40 to 50 years later. Spock espoused strong bonds of affection with the child. This is obviously a healthy approach to a loving caring relationship. However, in some cases, this pattern of childrearing could have gone awry. It has been postulated by Helen Childs in her article in her 2000 article in *The Gerontologist* on young and middle aged adult perception of elder abuse that it is that very bond between aging parent and now adult child that prevents the elder from reporting the very abuse that is taking place.<sup>6</sup>

Malks et al point out in their article in the *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* that “undue influence” is a common denominator in the financial exploitation of elders.<sup>1</sup>

Undue influence is most common in trusting relationships of long duration and can best be misused and abused by people who are both opportunistic and who can substitute their will for the desires of another person, which in this case is usually an elder and his parent.<sup>7</sup>

The Spock generation heralded a parent-child relationship based on a long-trusting relationship. Malks et al found that it was very difficult to investigate elder financial abuse because the alleged victims want to protect the perpetrator, who is frequently their adult child.<sup>1</sup> So the very positive parenting guide given to post-World War II parents to raise a psychologically well-adjusted child may have gone wrong in a few families, with children using that bond 50 years later to take fiscal advantage of the deep parent-child relationship and by exerting “undue influence.”

### **The Correlation Between Substance Abuse and Elder Abuse**

Another possible trigger for the Aging Peter Pan might have been the drug culture that arose among pubescent ►

teens and 20-somethings of the 1960's and the early 1970's. When baby boomers were adolescents in the 1960's and 1970's, their generation was famous for experimenting with drugs. However, with some individuals, this typical adolescent experimentation continued on to substance abuse, where many young people became impaired over time. This substance abuse led some adult children to have continued dependence on their parents and in some cases resulted in fiscal or physical elder abuse.

The State of Illinois conducted research through its Elder Abuse and Neglect and Exploitation tracking system (ANETS), which was published in *The Gerontologist* in 1997.<sup>8</sup> The researchers studied 2577 cases of elder abuse, exploitation, and neglect in non-institutional settings between 1989 and 1991. When studying the abusers barriers to self sufficiency (why the abuser could not leave home), the most common barrier was substance abuse. In the study, 60% of the abusers lived at home, 68% were white and 54% were male. Other studies linking alcohol and elder abuse include a Wisconsin elder abuse study that tracked older adults being abused by an adult child.<sup>8</sup> In this study, 44% of the adult children who were being abusive were chemically dependent and 69% lived with the elder.

In another case example performed by Pillemer, a case control study was done in 1985 comparing non-abused elders to abused elders,<sup>9</sup> it was found the abuser of elderly victims was much more likely to have alcohol problems. Another study done by Wolfe found that 43% of abusers of the elderly had an history of substance abuse.<sup>8</sup> In a third study done by Greenberg et al based on data from the Wisconsin elder abuse study reporting system, researchers found that 44% of the abusers had an alcohol problem.<sup>8</sup>

Greenberg et al found that there was an important link between elder

abuse and the adult child who abuses. That link was that the adult child was chemically dependent and that the adult child was financially dependent on the parent.<sup>8</sup>

Anetzberger in her 1994 article on alcoholism and elder abuse states that all literature is pointing to the idea that perpetrator, particularly the perpetrator of financial abuse, like our Aging Peter Pan, is dependent on the victim, which is the elder parent.

In the Malks article on financial elder abuse in Santa Clara County, the authors state, "many of the offenders are relatives, often adult children who rely on the victims for housing as well of other forms of assistance."<sup>11</sup>

Greenberg et al found that these patterns of elder abuse between adult children and aging parents were characteristic of an alcoholic family system. Cycles of abuse are linked to the larger system of cycles of sobriety and intoxication. The cycles of abuse, Greenberg notes, become predictable patterns confined to periods of intoxication of the adult child. If the abuse occurs when the aging adult child has been drinking, the aging parent victim can blame the abuse on the alcohol not the adult child. The aging parent "excuses the abuse."

Thus, you have the classic alcoholic family system with the elephant in the living room and no one seeing it. In this case, the elephant is the adult child physically or fiscally abusing the parents and the parents not seeing the elephant (abuse) because the aging parent believes the beast only appears when the adult child is drinking. This enables the aging adult child to remain a child, by providing continued financial dependency and parental housing. It also perpetuates the symbiotic relationship between the parent and child, which may have has gone on a lifetime, to the point of the aging child being an Aging Peter Pan and the parents being willing victims of abuse.

### *Financial Wealth*

Wealth is another possible trigger for the Aging Peter Pan syndrome. For example, the high real estate market in California in the 1990's created house-rich couples who became vulnerable to their adult children and other potential perpetrators of fiscal abuse.

Gail Bensinger in her article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2004 points out that elders are really tempting targets to perpetrators of fiscal abuse because the households headed by people between 65 and 74 have the highest net worth of any age bracket measured by the 2000 census.<sup>10</sup> In the San Francisco Bay area, she points out, much of the net worth of elders is tied up in the real estate market. According to, Bensinger, in the next 10 to 15 years, there will be the biggest transfer of wealth the world has ever known. This wealth is highly concentrated and has to be passed on to someone. Criminals, who are often family members, understand this transfer very well, and are ready to take advantage of the golden goose, which can be the frail elder and his or her homes value.

According to Abraham Nievof, a Berkeley, Calif. lawyer and psychologist who specializes in elder abuse, the phenomenal growth of the Bay Area real estate market attracts financial predators.<sup>10</sup>

Robin Yamate, a supervising attorney for legal assistance in Oakland, Calif. is quoted in the Bensinger article states her agency sees seniors evicted and losing their homes to fiscal predators who are often their adult children. A 1996 Administration on Aging report on elder abuse noted that elders are most likely to be targeted by their adult children using "undue influence" are the elders who own their own homes "that have greatly increased in value over the decade."<sup>11</sup>

### **A Profile of the Aging Peter Pan**

Several studies have shown that the typical profile of an Aging Peter Pan is:

- He is male: The National Elder Abuse incidence study final report published in 1998 found that 59% of the perpetrators of financial elder abuse are male<sup>11</sup>
- He is white: The National Elder Abuse incidence report study's final report found that the ethnicity of financial elder abuse perpetrators was 77.1% white<sup>11</sup>
- He most likely is in his late 40's or early 50's: The National Elder Abuse incidence report study's final report found that the 39.5% of the financial abuse perpetrators were in this age group
- He is an adult child: The National Elder Abuse incidence report study's final report found that 60.4% of the financial perpetrators were adult children and this is reinforced by the Administration on Aging National Elder Abuse 1996 study, which found that 60–90% of financial elder abuse cases was adult children<sup>11</sup>
- He is dependent on his aging parents and lives at home: Wolfe et al found that two-thirds of the perpetrators of elder abuse were financially dependent on the victim;<sup>12</sup> Anetzberger found in 1987 that one-third of the perpetrators of financial abuse were dependent on their parent; and Malks suggested in her article that offenders are relatives, often adult children who rely on the victims for housing and well as other forms of assistance<sup>1</sup>
- He may have a history of alcohol and drug abuse and a history of mental illness

Certainly not everyone raised by Dr. Spock's 1940's tome financially abuses his or her parents. Likewise, it cannot be said that everyone who "dropped out" in the 1960's failed to reenter society or take responsibility for his or her own life. Not everyone who has aging parents who own a home that has soared in real estate value has taken advantage of that escalating spike in appraisal and financially abused their parents. Nor, has

every adult child who is overwhelmed by the care of their parent turned their stress from eldercare to a fiscal crime against their parents.

However, it may be that someone who has a predominant cluster of these factors operating and has a history of mental illness may meet the profile of Aging Peter Pan. Wolfe et al found that 31% of the financial abusers had a history of psychiatric illness. Anetzberger in her 1994 *Alcoholism and Elder Abuse; Journal of Interpersonal Violence* suggested that a history of mental health issues is associated with elder abuse.<sup>13</sup> She suggested that what this history of mental illness does is to reduce the perpetrators ability to cope with the stress of caregiving or the "caregiver burden."

In the Peter Pan tale, Peter had never cared for Wendy; she always took care of him. When she left him, he just found a replacement. Caring for an elderly adult can be an incredibly stressful experience. What this stress can do to someone who has always been cared for and has never been the caregiver is to increase anger, perhaps increase use if illegal drugs and alcohol has been abused, and set the stage for an increased tolerance for abuse infliction.

Not only could it be that mental illness in the perpetrator of the financial abuse but also there is another interesting theory that the adult child perpetrator of the financial or physical abuse of an aging parent may be caring out that abuse when he is not taking his own psychiatric medication. A Wisconsin study showed that episodes of abuse occurred when the adult child had discontinued his medication.<sup>8</sup>

The Aging Peter Pan syndrome is a worthy subject for gerontological research of the future. Geriatric care managers encounter it in their work with families of older clients.

As more statistics are gathered by FAST teams, APS, law enforcement, and other agencies involved with elder

abuse, perhaps the incidence of elder financial abuse, which appears to be a momentous iceberg shimmering under the cold water of elder abuse, will be more quantified and statically found. And perhaps as the iceberg emerges we may see on the crest of the ice, Aging Peter Pan.

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