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**Media Scan of Older Adults in Canada during COVID-19 Pandemic:
Impacts on Abuse of Older Adults living in the Community**

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is causing a severe public health crisis around the globe. Older adults are at a higher risk of developing severe complications and death related to the virus and due to increased comorbidities compared to young adults (Sominsky, Walker, & Spencer, 2020). The purpose of this brief paper is to explore and better understand what the Canadian press has reported through online media articles between March 18 and May 14, 2020 regarding older adults living in the community during the Canadian COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the corona virus gave rise to a global pandemic and COVID-19 became prominent in Canada in March 2020 leading to nationwide requirements of self-isolation, and in some cases, quarantine. This simultaneously led to increasing attention of populations considered most vulnerable to infection and morbidity as a consequence of COVID-19. Older adults, particularly those over 65, were included in this group.

With our aging population, abuse of older adults in Canada is increasingly becoming a public health crisis (Castle, Ferguson-Rome, & Teresi, 2015; Roger, Brownridge, & Ursel, 2015; Walsh, 2012; Wang, Brisbin, Loo, & Straus, 2015). The term ‘elder abuse’ includes psychological, physical, financial, and sexual abuse as well as neglect (Castle et al., 2015; Miszkurka, Steensma, & Phillips, 2016; Souto, Guruge, Merighi, & Pinto de Jesus, 2016). Indeed, elder abuse has many different causes, risk factors, and interventions depending on each individual situation (Wang et al., 2015). Determining the prevalence of abuse against older adults in the community is a challenge. There are major gaps in the literature when it comes to

the prevalence of elder abuse, and few studies on adults living in the community have been completed in Canada. First, according to a 1990 study in Toronto, the overall prevalence rate of elder abuse in Canada was 18.4% (Podnieks, Pillemer, Nicholson, Shillington, & Frizzel, 1990 as cited in Yon et al., 2017). Other studies reported similar findings, including a 16% to 18% prevalence rate of elder abuse (Preville et al., 2014 as cited in Yon et al., 2017; Miszkurka et al., 2016). A large-scale meta-analysis determined a global estimate of 15.7% prevalence rate, which indicates there are 141 million victims of elder abuse annually (Yon et al., 2017).

Methodology

An environmental scan of online media articles published in the Canadian press between March 18, 2020 and May 14, 2020 was conducted initially using key words ‘seniors’ and ‘older adults’ for Canadian content and COVID-19. Subsequent probes expanded the search to seek online media attention on seniors living in the community, experiencing abuse, heightened topics related to seniors in general, and to COVID-19. All selected articles were available online, and no printed articles were sought. News articles, radio online, video reports, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces were included in the review. All articles were reviewed by three research team members with the inclusion criteria in mind. Eighty articles were identified that met the inclusion criteria, and of these 20 were specific to the Prairie region. Articles were from 40 different organizations, with the majority from national media outlets CBC ($n=19$ articles) and CTV News ($n=10$ articles). A final list of possible themes was developed, these were discussed in terms of frequency, they were numerated and ranked, and are confirmed as follows:

Table I: Primary Themes

Themes	# of Media Articled Identified
1. Caregiving	3
2. Human rights and ageism	12
3. Mental Health*	12
4. Financial Implications	20
5. Social Isolation*	28
6. Support for Seniors	40

*the report will merge mental health and social isolation. Articles may have contained more than one theme.

When seeking articles containing explicit reporting of the abuse of older adults, no articles were identified in the Prairies. However, two articles were found in the broader perspective across Canada (BC and ON) which reported situations of financial abuse of older adults as targeted victims (Sawyer, 2020; Vize, 2020). One article in particular, reported a warning to the public of a number of cases where older adults in Vancouver, BC were victims in a scheme where a scammer was fraudulently applying for Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) in their name and charging the client a fee (Sawyer, 2020). At present, there has been no other obvious reporting in the media of similar situations but given newly announced federal

government benefits to seniors it is unclear whether more scams will surface. Other abuses were not mentioned in the articles found.

Caregiving

It has been well documented that care homes have accounted for a large proportion of COVID-19 infections and deaths of older adults (Monpetit, 2020). According to Post et al. (2010), research has indicated that most older adults experience more than one abusive situation by a range of perpetrators (family, staff, other) when living in long-term personal homes in ordinary times. Reports have identified that informal and formal caregivers are experiencing multiple stressors due to their own concerns regarding COVID-19, ranging from appropriate safety equipment at work to imposed childcare and elder needs at home, among other concerns. For instance, in Montreal, social workers were threatened with being fired if they refused to work in long-term personal care homes due to COVID-19 (McKenna, 2020), despite their very valid concern for the inadequate personal protective equipment supplies. Therefore, there are also valid concerns that mandated quarantines and required self-isolation could lead to more neglect or mistreatment situations in the homes of older adults living in the community. These stressors associated with the wide-ranging impact of COVID-19, in addition to the fear of contracting the virus (even while grocery shopping), may lead to more cases of abuse and neglect of older adults living in their homes in the community. For example, older adults may feel their independence stripped as they seek the balance between avoiding contact with others to avoid contracting COVID-19, and engaging in their normal daily activities without seeking support, as they might have pre-COVID-19. Due to the self-isolation requirements, and in some cases quarantine, it could be challenging for older adults to report or talk about abuse to anyone, especially a caregiver they are quarantined with, or due to the removal of outside help/support

now prevented from entering their homes due to legitimate fears of contamination (e.g. home care). These factors can lead to further isolation of older adults living in the community.

Human Rights and Ageism

Human rights discussions in this environmental scan of online media centered on the implication of COVID-19 on the rights of older persons, and most often made reference to ageism ($n=12$). The highly publicized COVID-19 mortality and morbidity in personal care homes (Stevenson & Shingler, 2020) created an unprecedented awareness of and concern for the vulnerability of older adults and the state of care homes, more generally. The documented tragedies in Quebec has resulted in a steady stream of media pieces on the rights of older adults, as Stevenson and Shingler (2020) reported, that as of April 25, 2020, “1000 of the 1340 Quebecers who have died from COVID-19 were seniors in care”.

Picard, (2020) writing for the Globe and Mail, opines how ageism as depicted in a stream of internet memes, illustrates that COVID-19 is a way to remove vulnerable older adults from society. This speaks to troubling and pre-existing views of older adults, now highlighted in the media through what most agree are truly tragic events. Similarly, the phrase “Boomer Remover”, in Aronson’s (2020) review of the COVID-19 context, suggests that the virus, merged with embedded ageist attitudes, serves to characterize older adults as disposable. This depiction of older adults, based solely on their age, sets the stage for the accepting stereotypes and discrimination of older adults. Today, no other social identity or category and group of persons is quite so easily clustered together to describe a single rationale for discrimination. This deeply rooted ageism is one factor in the abuse of older adults (Walsh, Olson, Ploeg, Lohfeld, & MacMillan, 2010). Drawing attention to ageism in a human rights framework could serve to

promote awareness and advocacy for older adults in this context, and moving forward as we anticipate second and third waves of COVID-19.

Mental Health and Social Isolation

Rigorous measures such as social/physical distancing and self-isolation, which can mitigate the spread of the virus, were promoted and eventually mandated by governments worldwide in order to curb the pandemic. These requirements are also being imposed on older adults living in the community, however, these same measures have also been associated with a significant increase in depressive and anxiety symptoms in the aging population (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). For example, Armitage & Nellums (2020) state that, following the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003, suicide rates in the elderly were shown to significantly increase in Hong Kong. This highlights the pressing need to promote the mental well-being of older adults during this pandemic, especially since most reports identify the real possibility of a second and third wave. Accordingly, a number ($n= 12$) of articles found in this scan identified the concern for the mental health of seniors, particularly within the context of self-isolating. Social isolation has long been thought of as a risk factor to the abuse of older adults (McDonald, 2016), and while living alone can also be seen to be a protective factor for abuse, the COVID-19 mandate of ‘stay-at-home’ and ‘self-isolation’ could be a factor developing higher levels of abuse for those already in abusive relationships. Given the low rate of disclosures of abuse of older adults (Roger, Brownridge, & Ursel, 2014), the calls for self-isolation during COVID-19 indicate a much higher risk for some older adults related to poor mental health, loneliness, depression and suicide (Casey, 2020; Lapierre, 2020).

Self-isolation may also have implications for those seniors living in communal settings or housing blocks in the community. Canadian research supports evidence that some seniors in housing blocks may experience bullying prior to COVID-19 (Goodridge, Heal-Salahub, PausJenssen, James & Lidington, 2017). It is unclear how reporting abuse and mistreatment will be impacted by self-isolation now, and more specifically, in seniors' housing blocks. In thinking about how we as a society (e.g. police, service providers, neighbours, shopkeepers) can better support community-residing older adult during pandemics, this increased knowledge and awareness of abuse of older adults calls attention to the importance of better understanding related reporting practices.

Psychologists in Canada have raised the concern about the "echo pandemic", the mental health crisis that will remain in the wake of COVID-19 (Canadian Press, 2020a). Isolation, according to experts, is a major contributing factor to that looming crisis. While self-isolation mitigates the risk of vulnerable seniors from contracting the virus, it has debilitating consequences for their mental wellbeing. A March 2020 survey of 1,803 Canadians across the lifespan by the Mental Health Research Council found increased rate of anxiety and depression levels since lockdown measures came into effect (Canadian Press, 2020a). Awareness of the impact on older adults is key, as we improve ways for older adults to talk about abuse.

Financial Implications

Findings from this environmental media scan identified a focus on financial implications of the pandemic for older adults. Many older adults are experiencing financial difficulties surrounding issues such as: provincial pharmaceutical limits ensuing growing dispensing fees (Benner, 2020; Lam, 2020); increasing costs for groceries, grocery delivery and transportation

(Canadian Press, 2020b; Connolly, 2020); as well as retirement investments experiencing hardship due to recent economic crash (Carrick, 2020). While there is awareness that older adults of lower socio-economic status are more vulnerable to abuse (Walsh et al., 2010), it is unclear at this time if emerging financial hardship that may develop in families and communities will have a specific and more lasting impact on reporting of abuse of older adults in the Prairies. It is thought that greater intra and extra familial financial abuse may emerge in the context of a pandemic.

In response to reports that older adults are the “hardest hit” during the COVID-19 pandemic (Richard, 2020), the province of Manitoba has offered a one-time benefit payment to seniors of \$200 (Lambert, 2020). As well as, the federal government’s one-time benefit of \$300 is included in Old Age Security and General Income Security payments (Macleans, 2020; Naylor, 2020). Given the nature of the payment as one-time only, Sawyer (2020) signals abusive situations in Vancouver, British Columbia, questioning the public’s knowledge of emergency benefits to older adults. Clearly, while we know something from the media reports about nursing homes across the country, we know very little about what is happening to seniors living in the community. While questions surface in ordinary times regarding the rise of older adults using technology and doing online banking (for example), it is impossible to know if this pandemic is exposing more older adults to fraud, scams and ultimately financial abuse.

Support for Seniors

The majority of media pieces identified in this scan, included articles ($n=40$) reporting on the community supports for seniors during the pandemic, including Meals on Wheels and other food assistance programs and food banks helping self-isolating seniors (Dooreleyers, 2020;

Lozinski, 2020). A number of articles in this category ($n= 8$) reported on programs and seniors groups donating technology to seniors to help them connect with friends and family during self-isolation (Pullen, 2020; Risom, 2020; Seeburch, 2020). This number would be higher if we had included all the media articles about online services more generally available for seniors already. Other media reports indicate that seniors groups are opening new chapters of “Senior Centre Without Walls” and telephone community programs to try to better support seniors living in the community during the pandemic (Corrigan, 2020; Durham Radio News, 2020; Giesbrecht, 2020). These programs may reduce the risk for abuse associated with isolation (McDonald, 2016; National Seniors Council, 2014). They highlight a very positive thread in the media regarding efforts in the community to improve support for seniors living in the community.

Recommendation and conclusion

Recent media attention related to COVID-19 has drawn attention to the vulnerability of seniors, particularly those residing in care settings, but little has been said about seniors living in the community. Despite undercurrents of ageism and the hint of possible human rights violations there have been clarion calls for redress. Renewed public awareness has resulted in demands for national, provincial and territorial governments in Canada to address the longstanding challenges in care homes for older adults, and the same kind of attention related to vulnerable seniors living in the community ought to be offered. The need for mental health support for older community-residing adults has been identified here as a priority. Online technologies could be harnessed to provide social support networks and a stronger sense of belonging for those who desire more connection. However, while many older adults aged 55-75 living in the community increasingly have internet at home and are happy to use it, some do not; and certainly, those over 75 are not always comfortable using technology or they simply cannot afford it. Interventions could involve

more frequent telephone contact with significant others, close family and friends, and voluntary organizations. Education about disrespect and mistreatment, and what can be done, can be further threaded into these contacts with older adults.

This pandemic offers an opportunity to address not only the vulnerability of seniors in nursing homes, as we are quite rightly seeing, but also that of seniors living in the community. Some have long been vulnerable for other reasons, and especially, those who are subject to abuse. Education, awareness, and further promotion of what abuse and neglect of older adults looks like is needed. This is an opportunity to engage in research on factors associated with COVID-19 to determine if current strategies aimed at supporting older adults will be beneficial to the prevention and reporting of abuse of older adults living in the community.

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