

The Neglect and Exploitation of Older Persons

One of my most abiding memories will always be of a house with a completely overgrown garden, peeling paint, broken roof tiles and windows that long ago saw the last vestiges of varnish. Behind the torn curtains lived someone's mother.

I do not know the circumstances behind this; what I do know is that immediately after her death, two brand new luxury cars suddenly appeared in the weed strewn driveway.

Her children soon renovated the house and put it on the market. This poses the question, why did they allow her to live as she did for so long, when clearly there was money to have made her life a little more comfortable?

This picture symbolises the meanness of too many modern children towards their parents.

While the abuse of older persons is unfortunately rife, and takes many forms, meanness to older persons is even more prevalent and it does not necessarily involve physical abuse. It takes many forms such as:

- being neglected or abandoned by their children
- being exploited financially by their children through taking their money or by not seeing that they have enough for their needs
- being pressurised by marketers into purchases or investments that they do not want or cannot afford
- being overlooked by employers
- being treated as simpletons by large sections of the community.

Generally today, as an older person, you are more health conscious, have better medical facilities and know the benefits of exercise. As a result you are not only living longer, but are staying healthy longer. However, living longer has become a two-edged sword as older persons are sometimes seen as a burden and are palmed off into old age homes or, worse still, merely left on their own despite having many quality years ahead of them.

Living longer also presents a serious economic problem; the interaction between the inflation and interest rates paints a stark picture. For example, over a recent five year period the bank rate fell fourteen percentage points while inflation soared by thirty eight percent. The net result of this was that by the end of the period, retirees and pensioners, who live off their investments, could only afford one third of what they could at the start of the five years. Add to this the fact that some pension funds only increase by as little as 2 per cent per year, if at all – which is well below the inflation rate - and that medical aids raise contributions to unaffordable levels. Surely all this must also be classed as meanness towards older persons?

I have letters from older people saying that they have had to choose between medicine and food and that they have chosen food. Do these people no longer have families or are they an indication of the kind of society into which we have devolved? A throw away society that is also prepared to throw away its parents?

Sadly, often parents want to give their children money, to the parents' own detriment, as they then have less to live on. While this is a noble sentiment it is meanness on the part of the children to accept it as they are still economically active and generating an income - which increases year on year - while the parent no longer generates money and the buying power of the little they have, diminishes annually.

Parents may feel that their children don't owe them anything but how many parents, particularly mothers, have made huge sacrifices in favour of their children when they were growing up? Children have a moral duty not to be mean towards their aging parents.

The modern day demise of the extended family is regrettable. In bygone times when there were no pensions and few investments, older people remained an integral part of the family until they died. Grandchildren were taught to love and respect their grandparents and to glean some of their wisdom.

People who have elderly parents should recognise that there are many kinds of neglect aside from the obvious physical and financial aspects. What about emotional neglect? Merely because someone gets older does not mean that they lose their emotions or their memories. On the contrary, memories become important to older parents and they have a need to share these with their children and grandchildren.

The reluctance of many organisations to employ older persons is another form of meanness. Older persons may take a little longer to complete certain tasks but they are more accurate and more thorough in what they do. They bring with them a wealth of skills gleaned from a lifetime of experience. They are also more conscious of their duty to their employer than many younger people. In the world's changing economic climate, not only can many older persons not afford to retire, but the marketplace can ill afford to do without their skills.

Ever since 1994 the numbers of couples with young children who have emigrated has increased and in many cases have left behind aged parents to fend for themselves. These folk are frequently found living alone, in one room, often in penury, without a thought, let alone a handout, from their children, now ensconced many miles away. This is a case of out of sight, out of mind. Societies have responsibilities towards their elderly just as much as they have towards their youth.

In a recent speech to the South African Society of Seniors Organisations (SACSO) Mr Tom Manthata, the Commissioner of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), made the point that leaders of the new South Africa, like Archbishop Tutu and ex-President Mandela, have praised the youth to the detriment of the older persons. It is now incumbent on the youth to ensure that this state of affairs is corrected and that older people are given the necessary care and consideration that they deserve.

Organisations like SACSO are fighting for you, the older person, to ensure that you are treated with the dignity and fairness you deserve. SACSO is comprised of organisations with the same objectives, organisations such as GrysKrag/GreyPower and SAARP, the South African Association of Retired Persons.

A while ago an organisation arranged a train trip from Johannesburg to Robben Island and required a deposit of R1,000. When the people arrived at the station they were told the trip was cancelled. SACSO took this up on behalf of the people involved and have succeeded in getting a criminal investigation under way in trying to claim a refund of the monies paid.

Some marketers, particularly of insurance and investments, are known to pressurise older people into purchasing or investing unwisely or against their will. This is exploitation in its worst sense.

All the examples quoted constitute untenable meanness to older persons. Older people are the founders of the community and they have upheld the values and standards under which a civilised and progressive community should live.

You are entitled to demand the respect that you have earned and should be assisted to meet the economic hardships that are frequently not only of your own making but also beyond your control.

It is frightening that a society that rightly abhors paedophilia harbours a dirty little secret – rampant meanness to its older persons. It's time to shine a light into those dark corners.