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Sexual violence against older adults:

PENN STATE HEALTH ST. JOSEPH MEDICAL CENTER SANE PROGRAM PROVIDES COMPASSIONATE CARE

BY JULIE STEWART

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, but for Vicky Reilly and Heather Owen, co-chairs of the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) Program at Penn State Health St. Joseph Medical Center, this subject is top of mind every day.

Every 68 seconds, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted, according to RAINN, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. All year long, Penn State Health St. Joseph Medical Center offers services to help older adults – and people of all ages – recover from sexual assault.

SEXUAL ASSAULT OF OLDER VICTIMS

"When people talk about elder abuse, they often think of neglect, physical or financial abuse," said Owen. "Sexual assault isn't something people think about as commonly happening to older adults, but it can happen very easily in this population."

Medical challenges, both physical and mental, can leave older adults more vulnerable to abuse, especially if they depend on help from others.

Every year, an estimated 9 million adults over 50 around the world experience sexual violence or abuse, including rape or other unwanted sexual contact, according to the journal *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. The actual number is likely higher. Many older survivors of sexual violence, especially men, don't report it. They might fear no one will believe them or people will blame them for what happened, Reilly said.

"Many times when this happens with the geriatric population, the shame is overwhelming," Reilly said. "Often the assault is perpetrated by someone they're related to or relying upon, so speaking up has huge personal and emotional consequences."

COMPREHENSIVE CARE FOR SURVIVORS

When a patient arrives at the St. Joseph Medical Center emergency department after a sexual assault, they can go to the SANE room – a private, quiet area for medical forensic exams after a sexual assault. The SANE room is staffed by nurses who have who have taken a 41-hour course approved by the International Association of Forensic Nurses. They then complete a hands-on clinical experience, which includes competency in pelvic examinations.

Step one is a physical exam to check for signs of injury, such as bleeding or strangulation. Depending on the survivor's description



Heather Owen, a SANE registered nurse at Penn State Health St. Joseph Medical Center, demonstrates setting up a room for medical forensic exams after a sexual assault. *Penn State Health*

of the assault, health care providers might order imaging tests, like CT scans to check for brain injuries or X-rays to spot broken bones.

"Elderly people more commonly suffer injuries during sexual assault," Owen said. Skin loses elasticity and can tear more easily. Bruising and other physical injuries can be more severe in older adults, sometimes requiring hospitalization.

During a SANE exam, highly trained SANE nurses check sensitive areas, and the survivor sets the pace and chooses how to proceed. "We give them power back," Owen said. "We give their control back, and we make that known to them right from the start that we aren't going to do anything here today without their consent."

Forensic examination and collection of evidence – commonly known as a rape kit – is secondary to caring for the patient's health. If the patient wants the nurses to collect forensic evidence, they will. If not, they won't.

"Coming to the emergency room isn't just about collecting evidence of an assault," Reilly said. "It's about making sure your body's healthy."



Vicky Reilly, left, and Heather Owen are SANE registered nurses at Penn State Health St. Joseph Medical Center. *Penn State Health*

One thing to know: Health care providers in Pennsylvania are mandated by law to verbally report suspected elder abuse in people age 60 and older and suspected child abuse in people age 18 and under. Between ages 18 and 60, they don't have to report abuse if the patient doesn't want them to.

Patients and SANE nurses at St. Joseph Medical Center can also access additional resources through Penn State Health's partnership the Penn State College of Nursing Sexual Assault Forensic Examination Telehealth (SAFE-T) Center. Through this program, another SANE nurse at least 300 hours of clinical experience can join the exam virtually to provide support to both the on-site nurse and the patient. In a research study, more than 94% of survivors rated their sexual assault care as "excellent" or "very good" with the telehealth program.

SEXUAL ABUSE WARNING SIGNS

Some older people might not be mentally or physically well enough to speak up about sexual abuse or other elder abuse. Watch for:

- unexplained bruising or bite marks on the genital area, thighs, buttocks, breasts, face or neck.
- signs of control and estrangement, like if a caregiver becomes

an older person's spokesperson – even though they're capable of expressing themselves – and controls everything they do.

"Maintaining contact is very important," Reilly said. "Watch your loved one when they're in the room with someone. Do they look scared? Are they afraid to talk? Say something like: 'I noticed you've been acting differently when that person comes around. Is everything OK?'"

- situations when strangers might visit your loved one's home when they're alone. Offer to stop by and ask for guests' contact information.

ASK FOR HELP

If an older adult is in immediate danger, call 911. Otherwise, a visit to the emergency department can help ensure they are medically safe. Even if days or weeks have passed since the assault, SANE nurses can test for sexually transmitted infections, refer patients to counseling and primary care providers and more.

"Don't think there's no point in going because it happened two weeks ago, and now the nurses won't be able to do anything for you. That's not true," Owen said. "If nothing else, I can speak to them sincerely and let them know they're heard, they're believed and that it's not their fault."