
Letters to the editor

Letters received from readers in response to articles and ideas published in ANS are regularly featured, providing an opportunity for constructive critique, discussion, disagreements, and comment intended to stimulate the development of nursing science. Unless otherwise stated, we assume that letters addressed to the editor are intended for publication with your name and affiliation. When space is limited and we cannot publish all letters received, we select letters reflecting the range of opinions and ideas received. If a letter merits a response from an ANS author, we will obtain a reply and publish both letters.

ELDER ABUSE

To the editor:

Elder abuse is not an easy topic to study and Phillips and Rempusheski have written a thought-provoking article, "Caring for the Frail Elderly at Home: Toward a Theoretical Explanation of the Dynamics of Poor Quality Family Caregiving" (*ANS* 8:4, July 1986). Any investigation nurses undertake concerning violence raises difficult moral and legal dilemmas related to the obligation to report abuse when it is encountered. It is not clear from their article how the authors handled this problem. If caregivers they interviewed mentioned abuse to them, did they report it? To report someone who answered one's advertisement and is furthering one's research seems close to entrapment. On the other hand, neglecting a violent situation is equally problematic. Knowing the authors' approach to this problem would be helpful for those conducting future research in this important area.

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Author's response:

In response to Ms. Cundy, I am delighted with the opportunity to discuss more fully the solutions we devised for dealing with the difficult ethical dilemmas associated with our work in elder abuse. The very issues she raises are ones that we discussed and debated with two ethical review panels and our legal counsel. Using newspaper advertising permitted us some latitude in protecting the rights of the respondents because a certain amount of information sharing could occur anonymously. In other words, without knowing the respondents' identity, we were able to provide detailed information about the conditions and implications of participation, to explore the nature of the concerns being voiced, and to make appropriate referrals.

Based on our discussion with the respondents, they were able to decide the course of action that suited them best. If the respondent chose to terminate further contact without participating in the study, they had received information about where help was available and had had an opportunity to discuss their concerns and frustrations without fear of retribution. If they chose to participate, since signed consent forms were not required, they could still remain anonymous (three subjects chose this option). For those individuals who chose to reveal their names and addresses, the subject consent form stated that referral to Adult Protective Services would be made if in the opinion of the researcher the situation warranted it but that the subjects would be aware of the decision to report prior to termination of the interview. Consequently, prior to giving consent, they were able to decide if participation was worth the risk. As a result of this study, we made no referrals to Adult Protective Services but were able to bring a number of troubled families into the social services and health care systems through other means (eg, referral to the visiting nurse service).

The most difficult dilemma for us was that we were unable to provide follow-up for those individuals who remained anonymous, although we were able to offer them a certain amount of information and support that they would not have otherwise had. The ethical and moral problems associated with this kind of research are staggering. The legal concerns are much simpler to handle. In this particular study, for example, our legal counsel assured us that we were not mandated to report because the design of the study did not require an interview with both the elder and the caregiver and we were, as a result, unable to confirm the stories we were told. The research we are currently conducting requires an interview with both parties but our legal counsel believes that since we are acting as researchers and not in the professional capacity of nurses we are exempt from our state's reporting law. Regardless of the legal technicalities, however, we continue to feel our ethical and moral responsibilities strongly and try diligently to project our desire to help families rather than to punish wrongdoers. We would appreciate any further comments on this subject.

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INTERGENERATIONAL CAREGIVING

To the editor:

I would like to comment on Barbara J. Bowers' article, "Intergenerational Caregiving: Adult Caregivers and Their Aging Parents" (*ANS* 9:2, January 1987). Dr. Bowers' article appeared as I was preparing the defense for my dissertation, which focused on measuring stress, appraisal, and coping in the family caregivers of noninstitutionalized elders. I did not

get the significance I had hypothesized and the results of Dr. Bowers' study helped me to explain the unexpected outcome. For one thing, I had the subjects use the list compiled by Clark and Rakowski to identify the strain situation, which was the basis for measuring stress, appraisal, and coping. This is a list of caregiving tasks derived from an extensive review of the caregiving literature. The items selected as most stressful were not those dealing with hands-on activities but rather those dealing with caregiver feelings about the caregiving relationship.

As I reflect on some of the stories the subjects told me, the ones that generated the most emotional response were those that would fit into the category of protective caregiving, as suggested by Bowers. A vivid example was provided by a woman who was struggling with the knowledge that her father's driving was a hazard to society while acknowledging that taking the privilege away from him would be devastating to his morale. She had tried several alternative approaches, such as suggesting that he hire the services of a chauffeur (which he had the means to do), but he refused. She was struggling between helping him to maintain his dignity and independence and meeting her responsibility to society. One year after I first interviewed this woman, I got a note from her. The family had been successful in getting her father to stop driving and in providing him with a driver, although she says, "I could write a book on what we went through" to make that happen. That, combined with other changes in environmental circumstances, has resulted in a deterioration in his well-being that generated many conflicts for her. She sums it up by saying, "I know I'm not alone with these soul-searching questions, but it is heartbreaking for me to watch this vital, dynamic person I remember as my father be so hard to reach, almost impossible to help, and just sit back and do nothing while he is dying under my eyes." She had not done that. She had done every-