

A cross-national study of how expert social workers respond to cases of elder abuse.

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Elder abuse is a global social health issue and is defined as a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person (WHO, 2002). Over the last decade, post industrial societies such as Ireland, United States of America, Australia and the United Kingdom, have adopted social policies and legislation that promote the safety, protection and the rights of vulnerable older adults (Phillips, 1996). Current social policy debates relate to whether elder abuse is a social care, legal, rights or empowerment issue and should response services be specialised or generic in nature (McCallum 1996). These are key issues for the profession of Social Work which has traditionally played an important role in the delivery of government policies and services in the four countries investigated. Despite the profession's commitment to the empowerment of older adults and anti oppressive practice, the function of social work has been shaped by existing paternalist or legalistic social policy frameworks (Preston-Shoot and Wigley 2002). A small scale cross national study provided an opportunity to explore the practices of social workers in Australia, United States of America, Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom in response to specific cases of elder abuse. The study was approved by the School of Social Work and Social Policy and funded under a Start Up Grant, Trinity College, Dublin. Three Social Workers from each of the four countries (N=12) were selected for interview based on their current expertise in the field (key informants) as identified by their peers. Interviews involved the use of three simple vignettes depicting typical case scenarios of physical, emotional, psychological and financial abuse. The study findings of study highlight the influence of social policy and organisational protocols in defining professional roles and the limited use and influence of formal theoretical frameworks to inform professional practice in response to cases of elder abuse. This is balanced with a common knowledge of 'practice wisdom' that appears to be internationally shared by expert professionals in this field. This untapped resource has the potential to be translated into theory and to inform best practice. Comparative studies demonstrate the importance for social workers to look beyond national boundaries in order to critique their domestic practice and to identity and develop an international response to the global issue of elder abuse.