

“ PPP ”

People for Proper Policing in North Wales

CRIME AND THE ELDERLY

A public lecture by Mike Brogden, Professor of Criminology, Queen's University, Belfast Given at New College, 1st February 2001

Whereas Sir John Stephens (Frontiers of policing, Viewpoint 411, pp2-3), had things to tell us that were spectacularly shocking, Mike Brogden's lecture shocked quietly – for, as he said, **crime against the elderly is not, on the whole, seen as much of an issue**. Unlike crime against younger adults, or, even more so, against children, it is banal, boring, and usually unspectacular. The obvious case in point is Shipman – of course there was outrage, when it became clear that he had probably murdered upwards of 300 people, thus becoming by far the biggest serial killer in Britain's history – but how much outrage? It is only necessary to compare the amount of media coverage given to murders of single children to notice the difference. Because his victims were, of course, almost entirely old, or at least oldish, women, and the unspoken subtext has to be, well, they didn't have much time left anyway – soon, it would have been "time to go", a phrase that Prof. Brogden found occasion to use with chilling regularity as he reviewed the historical and social context of elder abuse in its different forms.

It was clear from his discussion of history and folktale that attitudes towards older people in all societies at all time have been ambivalent. Sometimes the wisdom of elders has been valued, but there are also multitudes of examples, eg from stories of the Brothers Grimm, of old people being killed or abandoned, either for superstitious reasons, as bringing bad luck on the tribe, or as being economically superfluous and a drain on vital resources.

So elder abuse nowadays is not simply the product of dysfunctional modern families; but there are certain assumptions and practices of modern society that make it easy.

Economic productivity is currently seen as almost a moral duty – the present government's treatment of single mothers makes that clear -so those who are not economically productive are immediately seen as of lesser value. The care home industry, with cheap unskilled largely female labour used to maximise profit, allows abuse to flourish, with institutionalisation and a dehumanised conveyor belt mentality, that can deprive its clients of privacy, dignity, money, and, finally, their lives.

Victims are most likely to be women, and the older, poorer and more dependent they are, the more they will suffer – those who annoy the staff by demanding too much stand out to be targeted, but they "bring it on themselves" by their behaviour.

The perpetrators are, uniquely in criminology, also most likely to be women, but as Shipman showed, professionals, men and women, can also be involved, not just the untrained ignorant casuals on the minimum wage.

Euthanasia practices in the Netherlands, where things are done more openly than here, show wide professional involvement. One of the most disturbing aspects of the perpetrators is that they are mostly normal, for anyone, given the right context, can be an abuser, and the current contexts, both social and economic are all too conducive. By and large, the police aren't involved, partly because elder killing is mostly "ambiguous, unspectacular death by attrition", and partly because resources are allocated according to the prevailing social priorities.

Thus we see police forces increasingly with specialised child abuse and domestic violence teams, but how many have units devoted to combating elder abuse? Unfortunately, it's not a glamorous career option.

What then can be done ? Firstly, abuse of the elderly needs to be properly recognised as a legitimate problem of criminal justice, which means the proper collection of statistics and reliable evidence.

Regulation and staffing of care homes needs to be vastly improved – such evidence as does exist suggests that the better trained, paid and managed the staff, the less likely abuse is to occur. Thus the primary motive of private profit in care may be called into question. But the most important change that needs to occur is in the underlying assumption that none of this, in the predominant scale of social values, matters that much, when "Granny, it's time to go" anyway. Professor Brogden was not optimistic about signs of changing attitudes at the moment, even in spite of the growing political visibility of elderly people in some countries, eg the Grey Power movement in the United States; but perhaps, as work like his becomes better known, and as his own generation ages, the rampant social injustices that his lecture so shockingly revealed will begin to be recognised for what they really are.

The PPP comments.....North Wales Police take seriously a whole range of mostly PC issues. But not crime against the elderly. Their deliberate neglect of neighbourhood policing and abusive use of speed cameras against the elderly are typical.