

Virginia Law Strengthens Efforts to Prevent Elder Abuse

The Adult Protective Services Act of 2004 took effect on July 1, 2004. The law expands the list of those who are legally required to report suspected cases of abuse or neglect of elderly and/or disabled persons. The list of “mandated reporters” now include dentists, pharmacists, certified emergency medical services personnel, guardians and conservators, as well as those (physicians, nurses, mental health professionals, social workers, and law enforcement officers) who are already legally required to report suspected abuse. All persons licensed, certified, or registered by health regulatory boards, except for the Board of Veterinary Medicine) become “mandated reporters” under this new law.

A recent article in the issue of *Geriatrics* describes how primary care physicians can detect signs of elder abuse and neglect. Abuse means the willful infliction of physical pain, injury, or mental anguish. Neglect means that an adult is not able to provide for himself or is not being provided services necessary to maintain his physical and/or mental health, and as a result his general well-being is impaired or threatened. Exploitation is the illegal use of an incapacitated adult or his resources for another’s profit or advantage. Here are a few of the major warning signs:

- Delay between injury or illness and seeking medical attention
- Unexplained bruises, fractures, lacerations, or abrasions
- Gross inattention to nutrition and/or hygiene
- Apathy, depression, or worsening dementia
- Injuries in various stages of healing
- Decubitus ulcers
- Lack of compliance with medical regimen
- Weight loss, malnutrition, and vitamin deficiency

Some things that can be done to prevent elder abuse and neglect:

- Learn more about the signs of abuse and/or neglect.
- If you are a caregiver, take advantage of services and programs.
- Report your suspicions to authorities.

For more information about elder abuse and ways to detect and prevent it, see the complete article at www.geri.com. In Fairfax County, to report a suspected incident of abuse, neglect, or exploitation of an adult, contact Adult Protective Services at 703-324-7450 (TTY 703-222-9452) or the 24-hour, toll free hotline at 888-832-3858.