

ESU 7th Regional Conference in Cyprus - Elderly Abuse and Exploitation 18th October 2015

The conference took place at the University of Cyprus in Nicosia. As well as almost 200 local members, ESU guests from Malta, Greece, Belgium, Poland, Germany and the UK were present. The meeting opened with a welcome message from **His Excellency the President of the Republic, Nicos Anastasiades**, via video link, in which he congratulated the Cyprus Seniors on their choice of topic. He affirmed that we should not be complacent, should encourage respect and the participation of the elderly for the benefit of all citizens.

15th June is now the UN World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. Although this is a taboo subject, it is now more prominent due to the lack of extended families. It is a basic human right not to live in fear of abuse, as stated in Article 25 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, also quoted by Professor Dr. An Hermans.

Mr Averof Neofytou, the President of the Democratic Rally (DISY) party, in which he stated that the Party must recognise the support of seniors, and the fact that Europeans are living longer. Seniors must be protected from unacceptable behaviour, and the reasons for violence and the symptoms of abuse must be discovered in time.

On behalf of **Mr Evaggelos Meimarakis**, President of Neo Democratica, a message was read saying that dignity should not be violated, and that seniors should live in conditions of serenity.

Mrs. Zeta Emilianides, Minister of Labour and Social Insurances, stated that they had revised the policy for families to support the activities of the elderly, and that more than 20% of social welfare funds were dedicated to seniors. Although abuse takes place in families, institutions and in the community, only between 6-10% of this abuse becomes known to the public.

Mr Ionas Nicolaou, Minister of Justice, stated that most criminal offences need a pan-European solution. He considered that seniors play an important role in conveying their knowledge and in helping families, and also a crucial part in the development of society. Seniors have already established social networks, and there are Associations for prevention and a refuge centre.

The Dean of Cyprus University, **Mr. Costas Christophides**, was pleased that for the 3rd time, a regional conference took place at the University. Seniors may be vulnerable because of their health problems but they have many years ahead to contribute to society and are the only group who have the time to reflect. Although only 10% suffer abuse and neglect, detecting early signs of abuse would help. As an example, a video from the Alabama Medical Center was shown.

Antonis Demetriades, President of the Senior Citizens Organisation of Cyprus and an ESU Vice-president, said that the elderly must get rid of the fear of abuse. It is not an easy task to identify abusers, as mostly it happens within the family. There is a need for a coordination body. A House of Elders already exists in Cyprus – staffed by volunteers – and they should be able to pass decisions to the Parliament. Enough of discussion, now action is necessary, he declared.

ESU President **Professor Dr. An Hermans** said that the ESU mission is the creation of an age-friendly society. She also stressed that the great increase in life expectancy should be perceived not as a burden, but as a positive trend. There is no need for new rules, but rather better implantation of the existing procedures. On basic principles we are working together.

Mrs. Maria Kanelopoulou, an ESU Honorary Vice-President, said that violence against the elderly, and financial violence in particular, is becoming epidemic. She referred to the financial crisis in Greece, where the elderly were the first victims.

A message from the former ESU President, **Dr. Bernhard Worms**, was read.

Dr. George Metaxas from the Centre for Applied Neuroscience talked about the myths and realities of age – that physical and intellectual capacity, rather than actual age, decide the ageing process. Education and physical activity are related to a better quality of life, and seniors should not have their movements restricted. Between 80 to 90 years old, most will need some type of care. Neglect is often a matter of ignorance, and society should be made more aware and responsible in the proper ways of dealing with the elderly.

From Malta, **The Hon Dr. Herbert Messina-Ferrante** talked about the abuse of seniors and their fear of crime, even though research suggests they are among the least victimised of all age groups. Media reports of such crime often have the effect of fuelling their fear. He also considered aspects of abuse as physical, psychological, medical, social and environmental, passive and active neglect - expanding on these, before considering the roots of elderly abuse – when society views the elderly as incapable and dependant, even if this only applies to a very small minority. Although rebutted by many studies, these assumptions reflect deep cultural beliefs, he explained. Finally, he made the following recommendations – campaigns to raise awareness, closer monitoring of medical treatment for the elderly, and more caution by lawyers and doctors when asked to declare seniors incapable of administering their finances.

Mrs. Maria Kanelopoulou said that people should not be reduced to numbers. The value of dignity is decreasing and the elderly are the first victims. Lenders make conditions to enslave the people, citizens in debt have lost their capacity to be free citizens. Domestic violence is out of control, and the family has become a place of terror instead of refuge. Violence is restricting freedom of movement, emotional abuse or financial exploitation. The biggest problem is in detecting abuse, because the family knows how to hide it and the elderly are afraid of retaliation. The elderly must have a voice, and not wait for the younger generation do something for them. “We have to act for us”. She also wants to create a “council of elders”, as in ancient Greece, with no new rules passed without the consideration of that council.

Mr Socrates Panayi, a psychologist/therapist, asked where the 3rd Age starts – in Cyprus at 65+ for women and 68+ for men. Abuse is the improper handling of an older person. Many perceptions are based on stereotypes. For the elderly, it is important to be aware how easily they may lose their legal capacity and their children can take over the management of their assets.

Concluding the conference, **Prof. Dr. An Hermans** said that all people should be respected as human beings. It is necessary to avoid stereotypes, to work together and look for a solution to how we can bridge the gap between principle and reality. She thanked Antonis and said that she will take the ideas to the European level. All should go in the direction of building an age-friendly society. In this respect, it is very important to have an information campaign.