

EDITORIAL

When it's unsafe at home

A survey taken by the health ministry between May and June shows 12,575 cases of physical, psychological and other kinds of abuse of people aged 65 years and over in the year since the law to prevent abuse of elderly people went into effect in April 2006. Experts believe the figures reported by the nation's 47 prefectures, 1,829 municipalities and Tokyo's 23 wards represent only the tip of the iceberg. The total figure includes 53 cases of abuse by workers at nursing care facilities.

The finding, which breaks down to one case of abuse for every 2,000 elderly persons, points to the need to enlighten people about the human rights of senior citizens and to spread consultation services at the municipal and community level. The ministry analyzed about 9,900 reported cases and found that about 40 percent of abuse victims suffered from senile dementia and needed nursing care. Of these, 77 percent were women; about 40 percent of the women were in the 80-89 age bracket. Physical abuse accounted for 64 percent of the reported abuse, followed by psychological or verbal abuse, neglect of care, and liquidation of property without consent, in that order.

Of the abusers, 37 percent were sons, 14 percent husbands, 14 percent daughters, and 10 percent the wives of sons. A saddening fact is that for some elderly people, their own homes have become a place where they don't feel safe. It is even reported that there have been cases in which elderly people endure abuse because they feel guilty about having to be looked after by those who abuse them. In one of every three abuse cases, municipalities temporarily took victims into protective custody or put them in nursing care facilities.

To prevent abuse, it is necessary to analyze more data, including psychological and other problems of abusers. To deal with abuse, 19 percent of the municipalities have networks of public health centers, hospitals, police, lawyers, care managers, etc. Other municipalities should learn from these.