

EDITORIAL

Cruel treatment of the elderly

The health and welfare ministry announced Dec. 6 that fiscal 2010 saw a record 16,668 cases of cruel treatment of elderly people by family members or other relatives, a rise of 6.7 percent from the previous year. The cruelty by nursing home workers resulted in 21 deaths, 11 fewer than in the previous year. The ministry's survey, based on reports from municipalities, does not include data from five municipalities in Iwate and Miyagi prefectures that were devastated by the March 11 disasters.

In fiscal 2010, municipalities across the nation received 25,315 notices or requests for consultations concerning suspected cruel treatment of elderly people by family members or other relatives — an increase of 8.2 percent from fiscal 2009 — and determined that 16,668 cases of cruel treatment had transpired.

There were also a record 96 cases of cruel treatment of the elderly by nursing home workers in fiscal 2010, an increase of 26.3 percent from the previous year.

The multiple-answer survey shows that cruel treatment by family members and other relatives breaks down as follows: physical abuse (63.4 percent), verbal abuse (39 percent), neglect (25.6 percent) and financial abuse such as stealing money or property (25.5 percent). The largest number of cases of cruelty (37.3 percent) took place in households where elderly people live with an unmarried child. Among those who inflicted the cruelty, 42.6 percent were the son of the victim, 16.9 percent the husband, and 15.6 percent the daughter.

The ministry says that there is a high risk of cruel treatment in households consisting of an elderly mother and her unmarried son. This suggests the possibility that in such cases the sons, sandwiched by the responsibilities of work and taking care of their mothers, become overwhelmed by stress and lash out.

Many factors are involved in the cruel treatment of elderly people, including the nation's prolonged economic stagnation and the unstable employment situation. At nursing homes, workers are enduring difficult conditions. Nursing-care employees are overworked and underpaid, resulting in a constant exodus of workers and stress for those who remain. The central government must strive to improve their working conditions, including taking measures to increase their compensation. Local governments and communities can also play

their part, like strengthening networks that caretakers of elderly people can rely on for help.

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