

# Tackling financial exploitation of elderly people

February 9 2012

---

Professionals who are in close contact with elderly people could soon be in a better position to spot if they are being financially exploited, for example through a lottery scam or by a deceitful relative draining the bank account, thanks to a pioneering new study funded by the UK Research Councils' New Dynamics of Ageing programme (NDA).

Researchers have started to untangle the complex decision-making process that professionals go through when confronted with an [elderly person](#) whose [financial situation](#) raises suspicions that exploitation may be taking place. The research was led by psychologist Professor Mary Gilhooly of Brunel University, who worked with colleagues from Brunel and the universities of Hertfordshire, Plymouth, Northumbria and [East Anglia](#).

"The number of frail and mentally impaired older people in society is increasing, and there are growing challenges with money handling," said Professor Gilhooly. "There are many stories of [elderly people](#) being financially exploited through scams or [relatives](#) - although there has not been enough academic research on the issue. "

The researchers wanted to find out how professionals who deal with the elderly make decisions relating to potential [financial exploitation](#) – what information they use, how they weigh it up, and whether they decide to act or not.

"It is a complex process," said Professor Gilhooly. "First you have to

notice that something is wrong, then you have to decide whether it is abuse and this is clearly not straightforward. You need to make the decision whether to do something or not, and if you do decide to intervene you need the appropriate skills. Things could go wrong at any one of these points."

The researchers focused on three groups of professionals: healthcare workers, social care workers and bankers. The professionals were presented with a range of scenarios based on real-life cases of financial abuse and questioned on how they would respond and what 'cues' would raise their suspicions of something being amiss.

"We found that while there may be multiple cues that could be taken into account when considering the likelihood that financial exploitation is taking place, only two or three are really important," said Professor Gilhooly.

Amongst social care and health professionals only two factors had a significant influence on the certainty of abuse:

- The older person's mental capacity.  
In cases where the older person was more confused and forgetful, this increased suspicion that financial abuse was taking place.
- The nature of the financial problem.  
Financial problems where building work had been paid for but had not been carried out were seen as the strongest indicator of abuse. Cases where there was very little money for day-to-day necessities were given the lowest certainty of abuse.

Amongst banking and finance professionals, three case features significantly influenced certainty of financial abuse:

- The nature of the financial problem.  
Certainty of abuse was highest when the financial problem involved a customer asking to transfer money overseas to claim a cash prize. Cases where the bank account was unexpectedly overdrawn were rated the lowest certainty of abuse.
- The older person's mental capacity.  
In cases where the older person was more confused and forgetful, there was increased suspicion that financial abuse was taking place.
- Person in charge of the money.  
Banking and financial professionals were less certain if [financial abuse](#) was occurring if the older person was in charge of his or her own finances.

"By systematically analysing how these decisions are arrived at, such as is exploitation taking place and should we act upon it, should allow a better understanding of the most important signs to look out for and then how best to tackle the issue," said Professor Gilhooly. "We think that the case studies we devised could be useful training tools." A follow-up study sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has recently been launched to investigate the potential of online training of professionals in understanding these various cues.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

Citation: Tackling financial exploitation of elderly people (2012, February 9) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-02-tackling-financial-exploitation-elderly-people.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.