

Seniors and Addictions

Increasing Awareness of a Hidden Problem

A young woman puts her grandmother's groceries away and discovers, hidden behind the cereal boxes, a bottle of scotch. The elderly woman, embarrassed that her granddaughter found the bottle, nervously explains the situation. "My doctor told me that an ounce a day would help me to sleep better. Now, don't you go telling anyone about this!"

Not one to make judgements, the young woman ensures her grandmother that the secret will be kept. After all, an ounce of scotch a day never hurt anyone. But in the back of her mind, there's a nagging worry: what about all those pills her grandmother takes for insomnia, high blood pressure and depression? Could the alcohol cause a bad reaction?

This granddaughter has stumbled into a situation that professionals in the addictions field are calling a hidden problem: older adults can be affected by dependency issues, but their needs are often unrecognized and unaddressed by addictions service providers from all sectors.

Consider these statistics presented by Partners Seeking Solutions with Seniors* in its 2003 *Dependency Issues in Seniors Project*: older adults are the age group most likely to drink alcohol four or more times a week; this group takes an average of 15 prescriptions per year, often taking up to 10 different medications at one time; and, while older adults make up only 12.5% of Canadians, they purchase 70% of all over-the-counter (OTC) drugs.

So, what is the problem with this? Plenty, according to AFM's Sheri Fandrey, Prevention and Education Consultant at the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM).

"Inappropriate medication use, whether it is intentional or unintentional, can lead to addiction," she says. "For example, an older person may use a prescribed sleeping pill longer than intended and end up with a dependence on that medication."

As well, different combinations of prescription and OTC drugs, or drugs mixed with alcohol use, can cause all sorts of negative effects, such as cognitive impairment, reduced effectiveness of the medication and falls leading to physical injury. For those suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's disease, moderate use of alcohol alone can speed the course of cognitive decline and can exacerbate or cause personality changes or behaviour disturbances.

These issues can lead to a long list of other consequences, including increased use of health services, family problems, elder abuse, institutionalization and premature death.

Increased Awareness as a First Step

The first step to addressing the issue of older adults and dependency is to increase awareness about substance misuse and abuse amongst addiction service providers,

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the medical community, the general public, as well as older adults themselves. For example, health care practitioners may not be aware that alcohol use may mask the effects of a cognitive disorder, leading to inaccurate assessments. Medical professionals may not routinely ask elderly patients about their alcohol use before prescribing drugs, inadvertently leaving the patient at risk for adverse affects.

Increased awareness must extend to the older adult and their families, teaching them that, as people age, the ability to eliminate drugs efficiently decreases. With slower liver metabolism, they will experience a much more pronounced effect from the same dose of alcohol or medication than a younger person. At the same time, attempts need to be made to penetrate attitudinal barriers, such as the belief of many older adults that it is unacceptable to ask for help or to admit to a problem, as in the case of the ashamed grandmother with the bottle in her cupboard.

AFM's Initiatives

To increase awareness about these topics, and many others related to older adults and addictions, the AFM has developed several initiatives. One involves the AFM working with service providers in communities across the province to provide education to the public and to encourage communities to take action in whatever way they can – from distributing information to seniors groups to providing seminars for health care providers.

Deb Kostyk, Seniors Prevention and Education Consultant at AFM, says that work is being done to increase the knowledge and awareness of AFM staff.

“For several years, we’ve offered a Seniors and Addictions course for interested people, including AFM staff,” says Kostyk. “And we can also offer a new workshop called ‘Through Other Eyes’ that involves experiential training using special equipment, like goggles, weights and canes, to teach staff about some of the physical changes that older people face. Staff have a lot of fun, but they learn a lot, too.”

GAMBLING AND OLDER ADULTS

While older adults can experience dependence issues with alcohol and other drugs, gambling can also cause problems. Gambling is an activity that has become an accepted form of entertainment, and many older people are participating and encouraging their friends to participate. For example, a prevalence study conducted by AFM in 2000 found that 77.5% of older Manitobans reported that they gamble. While the vast majority do so without experiencing any problems, 1.6% reported problem gambling and 1.2% reported probable pathological gambling. As well, 5% of the total sample reported negative experiences because of someone else’s gambling. Problems that occur in the lives of these people include financial hardship and family relationship problems.

AFM is raising awareness about older adults and problem gambling through a poster and pamphlet campaign, staff training, the development of a gambling awareness bingo game and a one-hour awareness session, which staff can present in communities.

In the future, AFM plans to address other issues concerning older adults and addictions – the availability of services and the ability of this group to access those services. Currently in Manitoba, rehabilitation services specifically designed for older adults are modest at best.

A change in AFM’s 2002 Code of Professional Practice is a move towards improved services. The Code allows for home visits to older adult’s homes when a new protocol is followed. This is a first step to providing service to seniors in a new and client-focused way. As well, each of AFM’s three regions has a staff member knowledgeable in seniors issues who is available for counselling, prevention and education.

**Partners Seeking Solutions With Seniors is a Manitoba group formed in 2001 to examine issues related to substance use in seniors.*

For more information on seniors and addictions, contact Deb Kostyk at 944-6250.