Forensic Markers of Elder Abuse

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Caveats

• This lecture is primarily designed for professionals who work with older adults
  – Adult Protective Services workers
  – Health care providers
  – Social workers in the community and health care settings

• Some of the photographs and descriptions will be unpleasant and disturbing

• We’ll be focusing on physical abuse and neglect
I’ve had enough of this:

“That’s not abuse. He’s just old and old people bruise easily.”
and this:

“That’s not abuse. He’s just old and old people fracture easily.”
and this:

“That’s not abuse. He’s just old and old people fall.”
That’s not abuse. He’s just old and old people get pressure sores.”
Why the Difficulty?

- Why is it often difficult to tell if physical abuse has occurred?
- Why is it often difficult to tell if neglect has occurred?
  - Normal age-related changes
  - Common age-related changes
  - Context in which an injury (fracture) or wound (pressure sore) or event (grabbed an arm) occurred

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The Challenge in Elders

- Normal changes of aging
  - Multiple co-morbidities
  - Medication effects
  - Cognitive impairment
Normal & Common Changes

• Integument
  – Thinner epidermis
  – Capillary fragility

• Sensory
  – Presbycussis
  – Slower reaction time
  – Macular degeneration, cataracts

• Renal: Decrease in creatinine clearance
Normal & Common Changes

- Musculoskeletal
  - Decrease in muscle mass (sarcopenia)
  - Decrease in bone density (osteoporosis)
- Function
  - Gait & Balance
  - Driving
  - Handling finances
Dementia and Abuse

- May be unable to recognize abuse
- May be unable to report abuse
- May not be believed

- People with dementia are especially vulnerable
What are some clues that abuse may have occurred?
History/Interview

- Implausible/vague explanations
- Delay in seeking care
- Unexplained injuries - past or present
- Interaction between patient and caregiver
Clues on Physical Exam

- Sores, bruises, other wounds
- Unkempt appearance
- Poor hygiene
- Malnutrition
- Dehydration
Does the story match the physical findings?
Pressure Ulcers

- Can occur despite good care
- Worrisome signs:
  - Not being treated
  - No health care provider has been notified
  - Smelly, dirty
  - Deep
- Stages I through IV
Laboratory Findings in Abuse (direct and indirect)

- Chemistry panel
  - Malnutrition, Dehydration
  - Electrolyte imbalances
  - Impaired renal (kidney) function
- CBC (complete blood count) with differential
  - Malnutrition
  - Anemia
- Medication levels
The Importance of Context

• All bruises are due to the same thing: a blood vessel ruptures and blood extravasates into the surrounding tissue

• All pressure sores are due to the same thing: there’s inadequate blood supply to maintain perfusion of the tissues

• All fractures are due to the same thing: an external force greater than the strength of the bone was applied.
Context (cont’d)

• Our job is to figure out **why** these things happened
• Most of the time, understanding the context is key to making a determination
• Sometimes, though, it’s pretty darn obvious and I don’t really need to know much about the context!
These are tough issues and we need to be cautious

• Don’t want to accuse unfairly
• Don’t want to miss an abusive situation and fail to protect a vulnerable person
• We need to ask the right questions and listen with a critical ear to explanations
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