

SILENT WITNESS E-NEWSLETTER

April 30, 2004

Women Over 50 Suffer Domestic Violence, Too

[New York] – A recent US study found that women in their 50s and beyond report suffering physical and verbal abuse at a rate similar to that of younger women. The study of nearly 92,000 women ages 50 to 79 found that at the outset 10,200 said they had been abused sometime in the past year. Three years later, over 2,400 more women reported newly suffering abuse, according to findings published in the April issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Dr. Charles Mouton and his colleagues gathered their figures using data from the Women's Health Initiative, a national medical study of postmenopausal women. At the start of the study and again three years later, participants were asked whether a family member or friend had physically abused them in the past year. They were also asked about verbal abuse such as put-downs, severe criticism and threats. Overall, 11 percent of women reported some form of abuse at the study's start, with 89 percent of them saying they'd been subjected to verbal abuse alone.

Verbal abuse, Mouton said, can cause both physical and mental harm. Research has linked it to stress and depression, and people who suffer verbal abuse tend to report poorer physical and psychological health. Among women in the study, those in their 50s were more likely to report abuse than older women were, and low income was associated with a higher risk of any type of abuse. Black women were nearly three times more likely than white women to say they'd been physically abused, but white women reported more verbal abuse.

According to the researchers, most studies on abuse have focused on younger women or on frail elderly adults, who are at risk of abuse by caregivers. The new findings, they say, show that healthy older women may suffer rates of abuse comparable to, or even higher, than those of younger women. Mouton said he thinks doctors need to be more aware of the potential for abuse among their older female patients. He noted that he routinely screens such patients for abuse, although studies have not yet shown whether routine screening is effective in spotting and stopping abuse. (SOURCE: *American Journal of Public Health*, April 2004. Taken from the Silent Witness E-Newsletter, 4/30/04)