

Purpose: To highlight the issue of sexual assault of older people in hospitals in England, where the alleged perpetrator is a member of hospital staff.

Purpose: A research paper was published in October 2021 highlighting results of Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests sent to NHS Trusts in England. The FOI Requests asked for the number of incidents of sexual assault reported by hospitals where the victim was aged over 60, and the alleged perpetrator was a member of staff.

Methodology: The methodology involved sending Freedom of Information Requests to all 206 NHS hospital Trusts in England requesting information on reported incidents of sexual assault against patients over 60 years old from 2016/17 to 20/21, where the alleged perpetrator was a member of staff (including agency staff). Along with the number of reports, the FOI request also asked for sex of victim and alleged perpetrator, whether the incident was reported to police, outcome of police investigation and whether any internal disciplinary processes were followed.

Findings: Of the hospitals that responded with some data (others were nil return), 56 individual reports meeting the criteria of the FOI were identified. A further 19 hospitals advised that they held reports of such incidents but, under GDPR Regulations, they were unable to disclose exact numbers, but they were less than 5, some hospitals said less than 10, so the research can only count one for each of these. The resulting findings are that there were at least 75 reports of sexual assault on patients over 60 by hospital staff in the last five years. The findings also show that whilst the majority of victims were female, 30% were male and that a disappointing number were reported to police – only 16. Of these, 14 were closed as ‘No Further Action’ by the police.

Originality: Whilst there has been some research into sexual violence against older people, most notably by Dr Hannah Bows, the issue of sexual assault happening whilst in hospital perpetrated by hospital staff has not been studied.

Introduction

Imagine a headline that reads: ‘Over 75 young women sexually assaulted by hospital staff in the last five years’. We have seen a media outcry over the last 12 months about violence against women perpetrated by people in a position of authority. Public vigils were held for Sarah Everard, who was abducted, raped and murdered by a serving police officer, and the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police, Cressida Dick, spoke about the loss of trust the public now have in the police force as the details of the court case revealed that the perpetrator used his status as a police officer to (falsely) ‘arrest’ Sarah.

Another service we almost all put our trust in is the NHS. We rely on the country’s healthcare system to help us when we are unwell and play down worries or concerns with phrases like: ‘She’s in the best place’ when loved ones need to be admitted to hospital. But imagine another headline: ‘Over 75 older people sexually assaulted by hospital staff in the last five years’ – the first headline at the start of this article is made up, but the latter one isn’t.

In early 2021 I read a post on Twitter about a lady who had died in hospital in Blackpool in 2018. Valerie Kneale, 75, was admitted to hospital following a suspected stroke and she later fell and broke a limb whilst in hospital. When Mrs Kneale passed away shortly afterwards, a post-mortem was carried out and the results were shocking. The post-mortem found that Mrs Kneale had died from internal haemorrhaging caused by a sexual assault that she had been subjected to whilst in hospital.

A member of hospital staff was arrested and remains on police bail even now whilst further investigations are carried out, including into allegations of assault against a colleague by the same man. What happened to Mrs Kneale was horrific and I shared a Tweet about the case – only to be bombarded with responses telling me that this wasn't the isolated incident I presumed it to be. I decided to conduct a piece of independent research to find out how many older people were being sexually assaulted whilst supposedly in a safe place receiving medical care and treatment.

The results of the Freedom of Information Requests I sent out to all NHS Trusts across England indicated that Mrs Kneale was just one of many older people being targeted in this way by perpetrators working in hospitals, evidenced by 65 NHS hospital trusts confirming they held reports of this kind from the specified time period. I do not have an academic position and I was not funded to undertake this research so I appealed via social media for some help to publish my research. Hourglass, the charity campaigning against abuse of older people (previously known as Action on Elder Abuse), offered to help and published the final research paper on their website. I shared the link and key findings on social media and tagged in various media organisations and sat back and waited for the storm of disgust about these figures to erupt. Except it didn't. I had some interest from academics and campaigners in the social care and adult safeguarding field but not the attention I hoped the research would generate. So it got me thinking about why this could be, which takes me back to the beginning of this article and the potential headlines generated by sexual violence of different types.

Both the media and the Violence Against Women and Girls research community has a focus on victims of sexual assault being young, attractive women who are attacked by strangers. Dr Hannah Bows refers to the idea of 'real rape' victims fitting this profile, perpetuating one of the myths that exist about rape and sexual assault. When people hear about an older person being sexually assaulted it triggers a reaction of unconscious bias: older people are generally not seen as sexually attractive, we don't want to think about people like our parents or grandparents being sexually active or sexually assaulted; it's way beyond the comfort zone of many people and is also an example of some of the discrimination that older people face, seen especially here in relation to later life sexuality. Then there are a range of assumptions (or maybe stereotypes) around old age – bringing in a blanket label of older people getting easily confused, experiencing dementia, not being quite as 'on the ball' as younger people. So, we're already less inclined to believe, or even want to think about, older people who disclose sexual assault. Add in further stereotypes about sex and intimacy not being openly discussed in the past and maybe we then start to think maybe the assaults weren't really what the victims perceived them to be, and even possibly, perhaps they were just a standard part of a medical examination? Medical staff are trusted professionals, so we don't readily accept them as perpetrators of crime. The final straw of belief for most people drifts away with the information that around a third of the victims identified in this research were men.

Nevertheless, the research findings from my study last year are clear – at least 75 incidents in hospitals in England in the last five years. Only 16 of these were reported to police, and of these, 14 were declared as No Further Action by police forces. Only four of the reports led to a staff member being dismissed or disciplined. Sadly, these outcomes only reinforce the bias against older victims of sexual assault – at least 75 older people bravely reported a sexual assault by someone who was supposedly in charge of their welfare and hardly any were believed. With this in mind, I wonder also how many of these people were offered referral to a support organisation such as Rape Crisis or offered counselling, and how many people living in the community but experiencing such assaults would be able to access help and support from a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)? I suspect the answer to these questions is very few if any at all.

In conclusion I urge anyone reading this, whether you are a professional in the field of adult safeguarding, a researcher, have a role in the media or just an interest in older people or VAWG – look at your own unconscious bias about victims of sexual assault and challenge yourself to think about alternatives to the media representations about rape and sexual assault of people of all ages.

References

[Bows, Hannah and Westmarland, Nicole \(2017\) 'Rape of older people in the United Kingdom : challenging the 'real rape' stereotype.', British journal of criminology., 57 \(1\). pp. 1-17.](#)

[New Research: Sexual Violence and Assault against Older People in Hospitals in England \(2021\) | Hourglass \(wearehourglass.org\)](#)

[Policy paper overview: Tackling violence against women and girls strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)Hourglass \(wearehourglass.org\)](#)