

Study flags financial exploitation of elderly

A group of National University of Singapore law students who spent almost two years researching cases of abuse of the elderly has flagged financial exploitation by family members as a pressing concern.

They found that almost half of the nearly 50 elder abuse cases involved financial exploitation.

These included, for example, when parents are conned into selling their flats and giving their children the proceeds, or threatened with violence unless they gave in to monetary demands.

Lawyer Ng Bin Hong led the study by the group – the NUS Adult Protection Research Team – which looked at cases managed by two charities that specialise in dealing with family violence.

The study was completed in July.

While theft and forgery are criminal offences, seniors usually do not report their children to the police for various reasons, including a fear that their children will be jailed.

Many types of financial exploitation are also not regarded as criminal offences – such as reneging on a promise to care for the parents after the proceeds from the sale of their flat has been pocketed, Mr Ng said.

Currently, the only way a parent can try to recover the money is to file a civil suit but this can be costly and tedious, so very few do so, he said.

One case the group examined involved a civil servant who convinced his 73-year-old mother to transfer her share of the flat to him.

He promised to take care of her but did not do so. On one occasion, he did not provide her with food for several days. She fainted and was sent to hospital. A friend stepped in and helped feed and take care of her.

The son later placed her in a nursing home, where she died.

To stem such abuse, the group suggested that more forms of financial exploitation of seniors be considered a criminal offence. It also recommended that the courts order the abuser to compensate the victim for the sums lost, if he is found guilty.

Mr Ng noted that the proposed Vulnerable Adults Act, which protects the disabled and the infirm from abuse, does not cover financial exploitation as a form of abuse.

But a spokesman for the Ministry of Social and Family Development said that currently, the police can investigate financial offences that are under the Penal Code. “We recognise that socially isolated elderly are particularly vulnerable to financial abuse and we will continue to examine how we can better address these concerns both on the ground and in future legislative reviews.”

Theresa Tan