Back to Elder abuse a ‘hidden crime,’ MPs say

OTTAWA—A criminal crackdown and greater public awareness are needed to combat the growing problem of elder abuse in Canada, which leaves thousands of seniors “wounded and frightened” every year, a new study says.

Just as society turned a blind eye to child and spousal abuse decades ago, abused seniors are suffering from the same neglect today, warns an all-party committee of MPs.

Their report issued Thursday calls for a “cultural transformation” to ensure that elder abuse is seen as “absolutely unacceptable.”

“I’m shocked at the lack of awareness. If we can build awareness and just make it wrong, the way we did with spousal and child abuse then people will be more apt to break the cycle of silence,” Liberal MP Frank Valeriote said.

The report estimates that 400,000 seniors are abused each year in Canada, often by someone they know — a family member, caregiver, neighbour or landlord.

“That’s why there is so much abuse and it’s so unreported. Seniors are vulnerable psychologically but they’re also dependent . . . they don’t want to bite the hand that feeds them,” said Valeriote, one of the co-chairs of the committee that wrote the report.

“There’s all sorts of abuse. Landlords are abusing older people that are living in squalor conditions,” he said.

The findings are contained in a report done by the committee on palliative and compassionate care, an ad hoc group of MPs seeking to improve care for elderly, dying and vulnerable people.

Its chapter on elder abuse paints a stark picture of Canadian seniors suffering physical violence, sexual and psychological abuse and neglect.

And as baby boomers reach retirement age, they risk being financially abused as well, their assets stripped away, sometimes by their own debt-laden children.

The report makes a number of recommendations to curb senior abuse, which it calls a “too often hidden crime.”

It urges Ottawa to establish a new office dedicated to combating elder abuse and suggests funding to better research the reasons behind the problem.

It also recommends legal services for low income seniors and emergency shelters to provide safe, short-term refuge.

It also suggests that the courts aren’t taking the problem seriously as it urges a “shift in perception” within the legal system. Rarely are abuse cases successfully prosecuted and when they are, “token” penalties are handed out.

“It is essential that Canada comes to the point where violence and abuse against elderly persons is no longer tolerated even tacitly,” it says.

In addition to the work on elder abuse, the group also made detailed recommendations on palliative care and suicide prevention.

The report also urges a national palliative care strategy to replace a patchwork of services that leaves many Canadians without the care they need in their final days.

It says the health-care system is “unprepared” for the coming shift to cope with the country’s aging population.

The report recommends a national suicide prevention strategy, saying current efforts are “fragmented, disconnected and lacking an overall vision.”

“Suicide intervention does save lives. Yet suicide prevention and intervention is a patchwork in Canada most depending on the generosity of volunteers,” the report says.

It suggests coordinated efforts, better research and extra resources could save some of the almost 4,000 Canadians who commit suicide each year.

“Working together in a coordinated manner many lives can be saved . . . the time has come for Canada to seriously address this problem,” the report said.