

Testimony of

Kenneth L. Connor
Attorney at Law

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Shattering the Silence: Confronting the Perils of Family Elder Abuse

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for your willingness to address the problems of neglect, abuse, and financial exploitation of the elderly in our society. These are problems of enormous magnitude, but about which the public, law enforcement, and lawmakers have been largely uninformed.

I have been intimately involved with these problems for over 20 years. As a trial lawyer I have represented many victims of elder abuse and neglect. As a member of Florida's Task Force on the Affordability and Availability of Long Term Care, I have wrestled first hand with the tensions that emerge from the need to hold caregivers fully accountable for wrongdoing toward the elderly while, at the same time, preserving the affordability of their services. As President of Family Research Council, I sought to increase public awareness of the plight of the elderly in our society and to drive home the proposition that those who claim to be "pro life" and "pro family" have a moral and social obligation to protect our elderly and to ensure that they are treated with dignity and respect.

Theologian Francis Schaeffer and former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop rightly observed in their book, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race*:

Cultures can be judged in many ways, but eventually every nation in every age must be judged by this test: how did it treat people? Each generation, each wave of humanity, evaluates its predecessors on this basis. The final measure of mankind's humanity is how humanely people treat one another.

Mr. Chairman, the judgment of history about how we treat our fellow man may well be impacted by the work of this committee.

Even though we live in the most affluent country in the world today and during the most affluent period of human history and in a time in which our medical technology is second to none, thousands of America's elders suffer from abuse and neglect. Your own staff reports that 1 out of every 4 Americans will be a victim of elder abuse, neglect or exploitation at some point in their lives. Sadly, reports suggest that family members represent the largest category of perpetrators of abuse against the elderly (a sobering statistic for the former President of a pro family public policy group) In truth, however there is a dearth of data about these matters upon which you as policy makers can make informed judgments. Of one thing you can be confident, however: the magnitude and intensity of this problem will only increase in the future. Absent a seismic shift, all of the ingredients that exacerbate this problem are likely to get worse.

Demographic trends are against us. Currently there are 35 million people who are age 65 or older. That number is expected to double in the next 30 years. The over 85 age group is the fastest growing age group in America.

Presently we have 1.5 million nursing home residents. That number will double to 3 million by 2035.

These demographic shifts will likely have a profoundly negative affect on the economics associated with old age. In 1967 Medicare's cost was approximately \$1 billion. In the year 2000, its cost was approximately \$300 billion. Medicaid spending in 1967 was approximately \$1 billion. In 2000, it was approximately \$200 billion.

When my generation (the "Baby Boomers") retire, estimated Medicaid costs in real dollars may well quadruple! By 2020 or 2030 Medicaid could consume the entire budget of every state in the union.

The implications for Social Security are no less startling. In 1950 America had 16 workers for every retiree. Today that ratio has slipped from 16:1 to 3:1.

This data has intensely negative implications for the future of the elderly in a culture which has shifted from a sanctity of life ethic to a quality of life ethic and which increasingly calculates one's net worth in terms of cost/benefit ratios, quality of life assessments and functional capacity studies.

Given those factors and considering the increase in families which are disintegrating because of divorce (a two parent household is in a better position to care for its elderly than a single parent home), the pressures and attitudes that incline one toward abuse will intensify. Indeed, how long will it take for the youth of America---bending under the weight of ever increasing costs for Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security; strained by the pressures of a single parent household and sandwiched between caring for children and elderly parents who have the same needs as children; a generation raised on the disposable man ethic fostered by Roe v. Wade--conclude that the elderly are more of a burden than a benefit, useless eaters who are quite unwanted?

In his book, *Culture of Death: The Assault on Medical Ethics in America*, Wesley J. Smith, states:

"Our culture is fast devolving into one in which killing is beneficent, suicide is rational, natural death is undignified and caring properly and compassionately for people who are elderly... disabled, despairing or dying is a burden that wastes emotional and financial resources."

If you doubt that, please take a moment to reflect on the Terry Schiavo case that is producing a firestorm of controversy in Florida right now.

Mr. Chairman, my earnest prayer for you and the members of this committee, is that you will be accorded the wisdom to know what is right in this situation and the courage to do it.