Sexual Aggression May Be Common in Nursing Homes

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FROM THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN GERIATRICS SOCIETY

ORLANDO — Sexually aggressive behavior might be common between nursing home residents, according to a focus group study.

Most sexual aggression against older adults occurs in long-term care facilities rather than in community settings, according to previous case series. “Very little direct research exists (regarding) what we’ve begun to call RRSA or Resident-to-resident sexual aggression,” said Tony Rosen, who conducted the research within the division of geriatrics and gerontology of Cornell University, New York.

Fellow residents are the most common perpetrators of sexually aggressive behavior, not nursing home staff, as sometimes reported in the media, Mr. Rosen said at the annual meeting of the American Geriatrics Society. Among 103 participants in 16 focus groups including nursing home employees and some residents, 38% of participants in 18% of the focus groups reported having witnessed sexually aggressive behavior.

Inappropriate touching was the most commonly reported behavior in the study, in 38% of focus groups. Residents attempting to get into the bed of another (13% of groups and 18% of participants) and verbal sexual abuse (13% of groups and 5% of participants) were the next most frequent incidents reported.

A behavior cited in the focus groups that surprised the researchers was inappropriate caregiving, mentioned in 6% of groups and by 3% of participants. “Inappropriate caregiving is residents trying to give intimate nursing care to other residents, a phenomenon we did not expect,” Mr. Rosen said.

The focus groups included 7 cognitively intact residents and 96 clinical and nonclinical employees from all three shifts at a single, long-term care facility.

Major Finding: Among 16 focus groups made up of 103 residents and staff, 18% of the groups and 38% of participants reported witnessing sexually aggressive behavior in a nursing home setting.

Data Source: Analysis of focus group answers to questions at single, large, not-for-profit skilled nursing facility.

Disclosures: Tony Rosen, a medical student at Cornell University, said he made no relevant financial disclosures.

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“Another important finding is that the prevalence of behaviors that participants named was higher in smaller focus groups,” Mr. Rosen said. “This is consistent with previous research showing that group size can affect shared experiences.”

Management of these behaviors is complicated because residents have a need for sexual expression.

MR. ROSEN

Sexually transmitted diseases, agitation, and posttraumatic stress disorder, he said.

Focus group facilitators used semistructured, open-ended interviews. Average focus group time was 45 minutes.

The researchers also elicited reasons or triggers for RRSA. For example, a resident mistak-