



By Helen Tierney Bale

Through Irish Eyes

Elder Abuse - what exactly is it?

In Northern California we were appalled recently with news reports and a video from a hidden camera showing a nursing home attendant viciously beating a 90-year-old bedridden man. Surely this was physical abuse. The attendant was arrested and will be dealt with under the law. But what about other forms of abuse that affect older people? They can be financial and emotional. I know; I have been a victim. It's not a pretty tale, largely because I was not the only one swindled.

Mobility is a precious thing involving the ability to get from here to there easily. It begins with the first wobbly steps of infancy; for most of us it lasts through our productive years. Eventually come the aches, pains and stiffness of advanced years when we turn to canes, walkers, wheelchairs and finally powered equipment.

I've been through all those stages, frankly rejoicing that such help was available. I was even able to bring my walker on another delightful visit to Ireland. By this past March I realized that pushing the walker any distance was no picnic – my legs hurt, my back hurt and my shoulders hurt. Mobility was no longer easy.

It was hard to get into church or to the doctor's office or the library or the grocery store. I really wanted to attend the 'spring home show' on the local fairgrounds in late May, but I hesitated to haul my power chair out there. In the past we had loaded it on a friend's pickup truck and had a grand time visiting all the displays. But it was old and no longer holding a charge. I was afraid I'd get out on the fairgrounds and have it go belly-up. So I decided to explore the possibility of getting a motorized scooter if it could fit into my small car.

"No problem" said the genial man whose offices I visited to explain my problems. He came to my home, demonstrated a small scooter

and explained that he could provide a lift which would be installed inside my car. It would swing out, pick up the scooter and deposit it neatly in my little hatchback. I was impressed, I'd never heard of such a thing. Moreover, he said the scooter would come from Fresno, California and be there the following week. It sounded like Christmas morning, the answer to my prayers. Gleeefully I wrote the check, thanked him profusely and told all my friends how lucky I was.

Unfortunately, my luck ran out. The scooter did not arrive. I tried to be patient, but a slow boat from China could have made it faster. Finally I called, asking essentially "Where the heck is my scooter?" Oh, he was sorry; one of his staff had failed to order it. He promised to place the order "ASAP" and I would have it in plenty of time for the home show.

Another three weeks passed. I called again. This time he said the scooter had not been shipped because they didn't have the colour I wanted. Somewhat short tempered by now, I said I didn't care about the colour – it could be purple with green polka dots for all I cared.

Still the scooter did not arrive and the home show was upon us. Now it was a "deal" he

offered. He had a beautiful new scooter, never out of the box, which retailed at more than €900. If I gave him another €200 over what I'd already paid. "No!" I shouted, but he brought it to the house anyway. It was too large for my little car and it was a three-wheeler; I wanted four wheels for greater stability.

Next he offered to take my power chair to "his tech" – no charge to me. But when he brought it back he also brought a bill for €104.50, though the chair still fails to hold a charge. While he had my power chair I had asked if he carried parts for a manual wheelchair – one of the wheels stuck occasionally. Such repair would be very expensive, he said, but since his firm was going out of the rental wheelchair business he could give me a really nice one.

Again, when he brought the wheelchair he wanted another €200. Meantime we had found the needed part for €6 plus tax and a friend installed it in less than 10 minutes.

Finally, on May 23, he delivered a four wheel scooter. It was late in the day; I was tired. I told him just to leave it. A few days later when I finally got a close-up look, I found it was not the one I'd ordered and it was much too long for my little car. Besides that he'd made no further mention of the promised lift. I was frustrated and upset that I could have been so stupid as to let him string me along for so long. After all, at 86, I should have tumbled to the scam much earlier.

I was also embarrassed about it all and at first I thought I'd just take my lumps. But someone once said that evil results when good folk do nothing and my conscience nagged that if I let him get away with it

he might do the same to someone else. So I called our local sheriff. His fraud investigator had been dealing with complaints about this same man before but victims didn't want to press charges. My Irish rose. I pressed.

Now a long history of scams has unfolded. The man is in jail, facing multiple charges of embezzlement and fraud, including felony counts of elder abuse and fraud in my case. Detectives have raided his offices and seized €100,000 worth of equipment and two suppliers have filed civil suits alleging he obtained goods from them but never paid.

The bottom line is "caveat emptor" – let the buyer beware. Don't be as trusting as I was. Promises of Christmas morning can turn into April Fool's Day.

Sláinte!

