

## CARING FOR OLDER PERSONS – LESSONS LEARNT

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Our world is facing a rapid population ageing. The estimated number of individuals above 60 years is estimated to reach 2.1 billion by 2050 and the older population is currently at its peak in human history. Increased life-expectancy and improved healthcare services contribute to this 'demographic transition'. Worldwide ageing research such as the Study on Global Ageing and Adult Health (SAGE) and the Global Ageing Survey have shown changing attitudes, expectations and behaviors towards later life and retirement. This brings us to a vital question – **are we prepared to care for our ageing population?**

Once equated with decay, frailty, disease and other negative connotations, narratives around old age and older persons are now changing. 'Healthy ageing' forms the core of preventive medicine and is defined by the WHO as *"the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables wellbeing in older age."* Functional ability means the capabilities that enable people to be and do what they value. The concept of healthy ageing is to be incorporated in medical and social services alike and affects 'elder care'.

**Elder care or aged care** serves the needs and requirements of older persons. It comprises a huge range of services – *home care, hospice care, nursing home (residential care), long-term care, adult daycare and assisted living*. While the form and context of care vary across cultures and nations, the central principle stays the same – **personal and social requirements of older persons who wish to age with dignity and human rights, while needing assistance with daily activities or/and healthcare.**

Traditionally, family members were responsible for providing care to their older members, sometimes within the extended family home. Globally, there has been a change in elder care and responsibilities based on shrinking families, longer life expectancy, geographical dispersion of families, differences in generation dynamics and influences of culture. Usually, government-run elder care is rare in many Asian nations, where they are still expected to be taken care of by their families. On the other hand, in many Western countries, the common care facilities for older people are freestanding assisted living facilities, residential family care homes, nursing homes, and continuing care retirement communities (CCRC). The type and timing of care, finances and duration of care are often determined by the age of retirement, pension plan and social security benefits of the old age, awareness of legal provisions and respect for human rights. While familial bonds are thought to be stronger in developing nations, financial independence and policy benefits are considered to be the mainstay for developed countries.

*Let's look at the state of elder care at some parts of the world.*

### **The U.S. and U.K.**

Western cultures are known to be youth-centric, stressing on independence and individualism. An individual's value is often linked to his/her ability to work – which diminishes with age. Late years of life expense is nearly 22% of medical spending in the U.S. Many older adults choose assisted living, home care services or respite care. Though family ties with increasing age is often criticized in both these countries, the Government assumes added responsibilities through social care benefits. The number of retirement communities is growing.

### **Canada**

Private-for-profit and not-for-profit elder care exist but some services are subsidized by the Ministry of Health. In public elder care homes, older people pay on a sliding scale based on their pre-retirement income.

### **France**

Elderly Rights Law is the strongest among Western cultures. France has a unique legal decree requiring its citizens to take care of their parents. The crux is that it's rarely implemented.

### **China**

Eastern cultures like China's adhere to the Confucian tradition of "filial piety," which prioritizes the family unit and values elders with the utmost respect. However, with industrialization, family dynamics are changing. A recent Elderly Rights Law provides hope which makes neglect of older parents punishable.

### **Korea and Japan**

They potentially set an example for elder care and are also faced with rapid ageing population. Legal provisions are strong and 'ageing' is also celebrated socially.

### **South Asia**

Traditional values demand honour and respect for older persons equating 'old age' with wisdom and experience. Certain legal provisions mandate the protection and maintenance of parents and senior citizens (in India) and social security benefits (India, Nepal, Bangladesh) – however, the practical implementation is rarely smooth.

Though legal provisions, financing and responsibilities of elder care vary, they are connected by the common ominous thread of ageism, stigma, misinformation and lack of respect for human rights. The recent **GLOBAL REPORT ON AGEISM** released by the WHO in 2020 shows that one in every two individuals worldwide bears ageist tendencies. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has only widened these health inequalities in older persons.

The Right to Health is a fundamental right, and age cannot be an exception. Also, medical care and psychological-social care in older persons need integration.

Promoting independence, autonomy, dignity, respect and shared decision-making are the central principles of healthcare for older persons. Improving physical and personal mobility will help them gain confidence and legal protection services should aid their social causes. Financial protection is imperative. Elder abuse needs to be prevented at all costs. Health workers, media, and policymakers need to be sensitized about these nuances of elder care.

One of the best ways to go forward is strengthening intergenerational bonds (between ageing parents, adult children and grandchildren) through quality time. Establishing intergenerational relationships allows both groups to learn about each other's differences and similarities while building relational capacity and a sense of fulfillment.

#### **How to improve intergenerational relationships?**

- *Family stories and rituals*
- *Prepare favorite meal together*
- *Teach new skills*
- *Read/sing together*
- *Playing board/indoor games*
- *Gardening*
- *Culture and ideas exchange*
- *Share wisdom and emotional support*

How we care for our older persons today decides how we are treated tomorrow!

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