
PUBLIC HEALTHCARE UNDER THE PRESSURE OF DEMOGRAPHIC AGING

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Abstract: In worrisome days of the Covid-19 pandemic that humanity is experiencing, national health systems are under great trial. In the foreground are questions that cannot be delayed. Some of them relate to the organization and capabilities of health care to adequately reflect the needs of aging people as one of the largest and most vulnerable population groups. Undoubtedly the world is experiencing a period of dynamic demographic changes and aging population on the planet. Globally, half a century the number of people aged over 60 has increased more than three times to reach almost 2 billion in 2050, according to the UN expert's report. Naturally, the rates of aging vary across countries and regions. In this connection, the national health systems today are facing great challenges: the population grows older, healthcare becomes more effective, but more expensive, the requirements of patients to the quality of health services raise more and more. Support healthy aging means both maintaining health throughout life to prevent health problems and disabilities from an early age, and address inequities in social, economic and environmental factors. Bulgaria is ranked 6th in the world for its rate of population aging. The country has a high relative share of residents aged 65+ approximately 21.3%. Three main demographic factors are contributing to the rapid population aging: emigration, high death rates and low birth rates. Those demographic factors have created numerous political, social and economic challenges for Bulgaria. In order to overcome them was developed a National Strategy for Demographic Development of Bulgaria for the period of 2012-2030. Positive fact is, that the gerontological and geriatric research in country has increased over the years. Large-scale studies, undertaken by our team of the Faculty of Public health in the Medical University-Sofia, referring to the different aspects of health cares for old persons, reveal major problem spheres in this direction. *Purpose* of the article is to analyze, summarize and indicate the priority actions to optimize the geriatric care in Bulgaria, based on results of this studies in the period 2007-2019 year. *Methodology:* Included respondents are 2973 people, as follows: 1240 healthcare professionals; 1510 persons over 60 years, consumers of health care, 223 family members and nurses from 12 nursing homes. Information was collected about their medical-social, educational and psychological problems. The following methods were used: documentary method; inquiry method; interview; statistical methods. *Results:* On the base of a critical analysis of the summarized results, we determined imperfections in the field of health care for older adults. There are considerable problems posed in front of the health services and social security institutions. Insufficient presence of gerontology and geriatrics in the academic spheres makes the development of adequate, modern geriatric structures difficult. Determined are the main reasons for the difficulties of health professionals in taking care for their patients. Medical specialists often lack the necessary knowledge and understanding into medico-social questions and problems posed by their older patients. *Conclusions:* The tendency is to increase needs and demands of society for quality health and social care of adults, carried out by competent professionals. The need for long-term services and supports in Bulgaria will continue to increase as the population ages. Health problems of older adults require new organizational approaches in health policy and practice. *Recommendations:* It is necessary to ensure appropriate conditions for achieving diversity in structures and levels of health care and the application of integrated approaches to prevention and treatment in order to achieve a better quality of life for aging population in Bulgaria. Approaches to addressing the challenges of geriatric care in Bulgaria are discussed.

Keywords: demographic ageing, geriatric care, health system, problems, priorities

1. INTRODUCTION

The population estimates and projections of United Nations presented in the World Population Prospects highlights the unprecedented ageing of the world's population. (United Nations, 2019b). From an estimated 7.7 billion people worldwide in 2019, the medium-variant projection indicates that the global population could grow to around 8.5 billion in 2030, 9.7 billion in 2050, and 10.9 billion in 2100, according to the UN expert's report (United Nations, 2019a, 2019 c). Persons aged 65 or over make up the world's fastest growing age group (Eurostat, 2017). Countries need to plan for population ageing and ensure the well-being of older persons by protecting their human rights and economic security and by ensuring access to ageappropriate health care services, lifelong learning opportunities, and formal and informal support networks (Eurostat, 2017).

Bulgaria is experiencing significant challenges in terms of rapid population aging. Bulgaria will face serious economic challenges in the years to come as the population continues to age and shrink (Pitheckoff, N., 2017). Population aging will place unprecedented demands on Bulgaria's economy to fund health care, long-term care, pensions, and other public services (World Bank, 2013). In order to overcome them was developed a National

Strategy for Demographic Development of Bulgaria for the period of 2012-2030 (Updated national strategy for population demographic development in the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2030). Prognoses suggest a further progressive increase in the elderly and old people among us, especially those of the fourth age (over 80 years). The percentage of the higher age groups in the next few years will form about 24% of the total population. Old people are the most progressive and growing group of people using health care. Informal support of older adults is declining as younger generations move abroad or to urban areas for greater employment opportunities (European Commission (n.d.). This has increased the need for formal long-term services and supports. Additionally, economic sustainability is a major concern for the nation as population aging and de-population continues. The reduction in working-age individuals and the growth in older adults are having profound social and economic impacts (World Bank, 2013). The government, organizations, and other entities are encouraged to address these challenges by using new approaches (World Health Organization, 2017). The tendency is to increase needs and demands of society for quality health and social care of adults, carried out by competent professionals (European Union Geriatric Medicine Society, n.d.). Implementing healthy aging policies should be encouraged to increase older adults' well-being, while reducing economic burden (World Bank, 2018).

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Large-scale studies, undertaken by our team of the Faculty of Public health in the Medical University-Sofia, referring to the different aspects of health cares for old persons, reveal major problem spheres in this direction. Purpose of the article is to analyze, summarize and indicate the priority actions to optimize the geriatric care in Bulgaria, based on results of this studies in the period 2007-2019 year. During this period, systematic studies were carried out on various aspects of the demographic aging in the country and their impact on the health and social systems as well as on the quality of geriatric care. Respondents included are 2973 people, as follows: 1240 healthcare professionals; 1510 persons over 60 years, consumers of health care, 223 family members and nurses from 12 nursing homes. Information was collected about:

- Specific difficulties of the health professionals in providing medical and social assistance for old people;
- Educational professional needs in the field of gerontology and geriatric practice;
- Health needs of elderly patients and their satisfaction with the quality of health care;
- Organizing and implementation of medical and social care for the elderly;
- Motivational approaches towards the health professionals who take care for the elderly;
- Potential opportunities for improving geriatric care in Bulgaria and others.

The following methods of research were used: critical analysis and synthesis of scientific literature on the research problem; documentary method - national and European documents were examined, inquiry method - direct inquiry, semi-structured interviews. Own questionnaires were prepared and implemented to identify the factors that drive job satisfaction, specific difficulties and educational needs in the field of gerontology and geriatric practice. Questionnaires were compiled on the basis of a screening questionnaires concerning the professional qualification of the medical specialists, which provides elderly with health care, about health needs of elderly patients and their satisfaction with the quality of health care. Questionnaires are written and anonymous, statistical methods for the processing and analysis of raw data.

3. RESULTS

With aging, the medical and social care needs of the elderly increase, due to the high prevalence of chronic and degenerative diseases, loss of physical strength, psycho-social disadaptation, reduced social competency and increased dependence. All of these elderly people require not only specialized medical and social care, but also patience and understanding of their needs. This calls for the application of an effective interdisciplinary mechanism for the planning, organizing and implementation of medical and social care for the elderly.

Determined are the main reasons for the difficulties of health professionals in taking care for their older patients. For half of the respondents there is insufficient or missing knowledge of gerontology and geriatric care. Educational needs in medical gerontology are in the following areas: specific manifestations of disease in adult patients, age changes in mentality and behavior, communication skills for working with adult patients, training in health care for chronically ill and their families, aging prophylaxis.

A deficiency in application of appropriate motivational approaches towards the health professionals who caring for the elderly is noted. The results show that to be motivated to work with elderly people, health professionals need more incentives. Usually when there is a lack of systematic information on the attitudes of employees at work, the decisions related to work ethics, change, wages and allowances, the organization falls within an information vacuum. In fact, this phenomenon is common in health care organization in the country at present.

According to 2/3 of the adult patients respondents, communication skills, patience and responsiveness are the mostly needed qualities that health professionals have to possess besides their professional competence for implementation of treatment and care. Regarding to the quality of service that elderly using health services received, satisfied to unsatisfied ratio in general is 43%: 33%. Nearly ¼ of the respondents are partly satisfied by the health service. The overall assessment that patients given for the care and attitude of health professionals is positive.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The summary results relate directly on elements of at least the following problem areas in the field of health care for older people:

✓ *Insufficient adaptation of health and social systems to the specific needs of individuals in the elderly.*

The trend towards the prevalence of chronic diseases in these age groups have an enormous impact on the demand for long-term care. This problem may become worse if urgent measures are not taken to adjust health and social systems to the specific needs of individuals in the elderly.

✓ *Shortage of alternative and affordable forms of family support for care for older people.*

The vast majority of long-term care is provided through the informal network of family and friends. In Bulgaria, children are expected to provide care to their aging parents, grandparents, and other relatives. A model of home and community-based services was adopted. This development enables older to remain in their own communities, while assisting family caregivers. To ensure adequate quality of life for older people, especially those who are sick or disabled, their family needs support.

✓ *Urgent need for an expansion of the educational capacity in the spheres of Gerontology and Geriatrics for healthcare professionals.*

In this connection Faculty of Public Health at the Medical University - Sofia provides education on Gerontology in student learning and postgraduate training of medical professionals.

✓ *Manifestations of ageism in health care for aging people.*

Major cause of the manifestations of age discrimination is missing or incorrect information society in terms of aging at all. In the field of health care for older people such events were found in a few basic guidelines. For example: neglect the health needs of older patients; deficit of empathic attitude in carrying out the necessary care and others.

✓ *Risk of poverty and social exclusion*

Despite progress in recent years, the elderly remains part of the population at greatest risk of poverty and social exclusion.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the surveys data, recommendations for improving the healthcare for elderly and adapting the training of health professionals were prepared in order to realize the requirements for competent geriatric care in Bulgaria.

✓ Training of health professionals: In order to overcome educational deficits and the need to enhance the professional competence of health professionals in the field of gerontology and care for older people a team of the Faculty of Public Health at the Medical University - Sofia held external training in medical and social institutions in different regions of the country. We carried out discussions with educational presentations and interactive activities with professionals in health and social fields. This approach has several advantages, such as discussion of specific issues and case studies related to geriatric care places; reflection and sharing experience; saving time and resources for health professionals. The distance between learning process and practice is overcome using innovative experiential learning approach.

✓ Organization of preventive oriented system for health and psycho-geriatric social care in Bulgaria. It will ensure preservation of good physical and mental health of people in the elderly through the implementation of preventive programs and policies for active and healthy aging, and minimize disability, preservation of autonomy and satisfaction of supporting a network of individual subject patient needs.

✓ Introduction of a multidisciplinary approach in assessing the health and psychosocial status of elderly people in the preparation of prevention programs, treatment and long-term care.

✓ Ensuring coordination and continuity in the work of primary care and specialized social services district.

✓ Creation of an effective infrastructure in pre-hospital and regional social units, which will support family care and support as long as possible relative autonomy of patients. This will reduce the financial costs of government services for such patients in residential care.

✓ Dissemination of relevant information among the public regarding the opportunities for aging and mental decline;

✓ Update and optimize service in homes for elderly people;

- ✓ Development and implementation of intervention programs and psychological support in the field of aging and old age;
- ✓ Screening, prevention and treatment of adults at risk: loneliness and depression, dementia and other terminally ill.
- ✓ Economic security and accessibility of health and social services for aging populations;
- ✓ Encourage participation of volunteers in caring for elderly people;
- ✓ Creation of affordable social environment, maintenance of social competence and social inclusion.
- ✓ Enhanced media involvement to overcome the negative effects of ageism and creating a positive public attitude towards the elderly and aging workforce.
- ✓ Developing and implementing a humanitarian program in schools, including the positive image of the elderly.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The number of old people is continuously growing due to the increasing life expectancy. These changes are a positive challenge we have to face. It will depend on us whether it will be possible for people to age with dignity and in suitable framework conditions. Public health is and should be seen as an integrated challenge as it touches all aspects of society. More gerontological research and funding are needed to increase awareness of current challenges/opportunities presented by Bulgaria's aging population and to establish best practices. Positive fact is, that the gerontological and geriatric research in country has increased over the years. The Faculty of Public Health at the Medical University - Sofia has an active role in this regard.

To meet the major challenges facing health related to demographic aging in the coming years, requires cooperation at all levels - not only between policy, practice and research, but especially between different disciplines and international partnership in public health to promote the longer life in good health throughout society.

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