

Social issues and Gerontological Health Changes among Elderly Population: A Review Study

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Abstract

India's aging population is gradually increasing day by day. The elderly population faces multiple problems such as social, medical and psychological. There is a need to change social-life style for healthy ageing by increasing awareness and utilization of geriatric welfare schemes as well as accessibility to government health services for the elderly. The major needs of elderly were found to be economic dependence, ignorance to their advice, sad attitude towards life, loneliness, distant government health facilities and lack of awareness as well as utilization of geriatric welfare services. Therefore, it is required to recognize these problems and carry out regular IEC activities to increase the awareness for more utilization of geriatric welfare services. Further research, especially qualitative research, is needed to explore the depth of the problems of the elderly.

Keywords: *Elderly, Social Problems, Health Problems, Solution of Problems.*

Introduction

Ageing is a natural process. In the words of Seneca; "Old age in an incurable disease", but more recently, Sir James Sterling Ross commented "You do not heal old age. You protect it; you promote it; you extend it".

[1] The older population is growing faster than the total population in practically all regions of the world and the difference in growth rates is increasing. Currently, the growth rate of the older population (1.9 %) is significantly higher than that of the total population (1.2 %) [2-3] In the period between 1996 to 2016, Indian population in the age group above 60 years was from 62.3 to 112.9 million.[4] Even now, as the number of older persons increases, there is a growing awareness of the importance of active ageing.[5]

The rapid urbanization and societal modernization has brought in its wake a breakdown in family values and the framework of family support, economic insecurity, social isolation, and elderly abuse leading to a host of psychological illnesses. In addition, widows are prone to face social stigma and ostracism.[6] The elderly experience changes in different aspects of their life. This may be attributed to physiological decline in ageing

due to physical changes, inability to control certain physiological functions, various chronic conditions and change in socio-economic status. A feeling of low self-worth may be felt due to the loss of earning power and social recognition.[7]

A study of Bhatia H. S. (1983) shown that retired elderly people are confronted with the problems of financial insecurity and loneliness.[8] Aging has been defined as progressive, generalized impairment of function leading to loss of adaptive response to stress and growing risk of age related disease, resulting in progressive increase in age specific mortality.[9] According to Bhawalkar. JS et al. (2006) suggested that at least 50% of the elderly in India have chronic diseases.[10]

Social Issues of Elderly Population

This segment of population faces multiple social, health and psychological problems. **Some are :-**

i. Retirement, Changes in Income and Poverty

Some older people may welcome retirement as an opportunity to engage in activities that had been set

aside while working and/or raising a family. For others, retirement may signal a significant reduction in income, a narrowing of their social network and support system, a negative change in self-image and identity, and the recognition of their mortality. Older people generally have lower incomes than their younger counterparts, with women who are unattached (e.g., as a consequence of divorce or bereavement) being particularly vulnerable to poverty. The risk of poverty grows with older age and is much higher among women than men. Moreover, many older people cannot afford to pay health costs, including prescription drugs, recreational facility from their own pockets.

ii. Loneliness, social isolation and social exclusion

Loneliness, social isolation and social exclusion are important social determinants and risk factors of ill health among older people. They affect all aspects of health and well-being, including mental health, the risk of maltreatment and the risk of emergency admission to hospital for avoidable conditions, such as severe dehydration or malnutrition. Elderly person, besides suffering from physical health related problems, suffer most from severe neglect & isolation. The absence of supportive friendships appears to be a major determining factor for loneliness. Other risk factors include low economic status and a lack of security and social networks. In a study conducted by Khan et al (2011) observed that social isolation was felt more by the elderly by the upper class which causes more feeling of loneliness and neglect in them.^[11] Social and emotional requirements cannot be purchased by money alone. Social dimension is being so much neglected in the elderly that they feel their emotions bubbling but are not able to reveal their feelings and remain lonely & isolated.

iii. Spousal bereavement

Spousal bereavement is grieving the death of a partner is frequently a cause of medical and psychiatric problems for both older men and older women. Industrialization, urbanization and socialization are bringing changes in social values and Life style in elderly. Nuclearization of families, migration and dual career families are making care of the elderly more and more of a personal and social problems.^[12]

An important social issue concerning elders and geriatric care in India is the changing family structure. A

rapid transition to urban areas in recent areas has led to breakdown of the joint family structure and emergence of the nuclear family.^[13] With an increase in mobility from rural areas to urban areas in recent times, the 'joint family' is breaking down into several scattered nuclear families.^[14-15]

The problems faced by the females are more critical compared to that of men due to low literacy rate, customary ownership of property by men and majority of women being not in labour force during their prime age with only very few in the organized sector.^[16] The economic loss is due to a change from salary to pension or unemployment leading to economic dependency on children or relatives.^[17]

Health-Related Problems in Elderly

Health problems may limit older people's mobility, thereby narrowing their social contact and potentially precipitating mental health problems. The more health problems are associated with lower education, lower income, less health knowledge and poorer health practices, as well as lower perceived health status and lower self-efficacy. Health status is an important factor that has a significant impact on the quality of life of an elderly population.^[18] The health problems of the elderly are complicated by social, economic and psychological interactions to a greater degree than younger people.^[19] Morbidity among elderly people has an important influence on their physical functioning and psychological well-being.^[20] The most common geriatric condition associated with old age in India is hearing impairment, vision impairment, Dementia and Alzheimer's disease.^[21-22] Risk for cardiovascular disease is also known to increase with age. Diabetes, hypertension and heart disease are fairly common conditions seen in India.^[23-24] Social and psychological factors play a major role in determining the health status of the Indian elder. In spite of strong family bonds and cultural practices that revere the aged, depression still ranks as the most prevalent psychiatric illness of the aged.^[25] Some elderly are suffering mainly from respiratory illnesses followed by arthralgia, hypertension, GI diseases and mental disorders.^[26]

A study done by Shankar, R., et al.(2006) mentioned that compared to married people higher percentage of widows/ widowers suffered from old age related morbidities.^[27] With communicable and lifestyle conditions taking up an overwhelming majority of

India's public health spending, geriatric care is far from being a priority. It needs to be taken far more seriously as a public health issue.^[28]

Elderly have multiple organ system disorders. It is estimated that changing demographic structure will result in about two third of A study done by Chatterji et al, (2008) reported that Chinese health burden and half of Indian health burden to be in older adults by 2030. Chronic diseases now are the leading cause of death and disability among India's old in both urban and rural areas.^[29-30] About two third of India's old people live in rural areas and are illiterate and economically dependent^[31,32]

Health services need to be strengthened accordingly with increased emphasis on key service utilization determinants like service availability and accessibility. This poses a greater responsibility on the health services especially in developing countries like India where there is a greater strain on available health infrastructure^[33] Communicable diseases do not show a fixed pattern of change with the age of man. However, Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like Hypertension (HTN), Diabetes Mellitus (DM), Musculoskeletal (MSK) disorders, Refractive errors, etc and their related complications become more prevalent in the elderly. A WHO report states that NCDs account for at least 32% of all deaths in India with a word of caution that this could be an 'under and inadequate estimation'.^[33-34]

Injury

Falls and the injuries to which they often lead cause a large share of the burden of disease and disability on older people. The risk of falls increases steeply with age. Injuries from falls (such as femur fracture) usually require hospitalization and costly interventions, including rehabilitation, and cause much of the functional limitations that lead to the need for long-term care, including admissions to nursing homes.

Non-communicable diseases

Poor nutrition, physical inactivity, tobacco use and harmful use of alcohol contribute to the development of chronic conditions as mortality, coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, breast cancer, a higher level of cardio respiratory and muscular fitness diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and mental disorders.

Mental Health Problems

Many people fear growing older, and assume that old age is depressing and distressing, characterized by loss and disability, offering little to look forward to. 'The presence of a mental health problem is a strong and independent predictor of poor outcomes such as increased mortality, length of stay, institutionalization and resource use' factors influence the mental health and social well-being of older people.^[35]

Depression and anxiety

Depression is a common mental health problem in old age. Schizophrenia, Bipolar disorder (manic-depressive illness), Anxiety disorders, Post traumatic stress disorders, Somatoform disorders, Late life delusional disorder, Obsessive Compulsive disorder, Personality disorder, Self neglect, Alcoholism, Excessively 'high' mood, Irritability, Decreased need for sleep, Increased energy, Increased talking and activity etc. are related mental illness. The etiology of depression in old age includes genetic susceptibility, chronic diseases and disability, pain and physical illness, frustration with limitations in activities of daily living, personality trait (dependent, anxious or avoidant), adverse life events (widowhood, separation, divorce, bereavement, poverty, social isolation) and lack of adequate social support. A study done by Barua A, (2010) have revealed that the prevalence of depression varies between 13 to 46% among the elderly population.^[36]

The social causes of the mental health are worries, anxieties, emotional stress, tension, frustration, unhappy family, broken family, poverty, industrialization, urbanization, changing family structure, economic insecurity, rejection, neglect, etc. The emotional response to these problems include grief, guilt, loneliness, loss of meaning in life, lack of motivation, anger, feelings of powerlessness and a wide variety of psychiatric diseases.

Conclusion

In India the elderly population is 10 crore forming 10% of total population and it is estimated to reach up to 15 crore by the year 2020. There is a need for geriatric counseling centers that can take care of their physical, and socio psychological needs. There is also a growing need for interventions to ensure the health of this vulnerable group and to create a policy to meet the care and needs of the disabled elderly. The major needs of elderly were found to be economic dependence,

ignorance to their advice, sad attitude towards life, loneliness, distant government health facilities and lack of awareness as well as utilization of geriatric welfare services. Therefore, it is required to recognize these problems and carry out regular IEC activities to increase the awareness for more utilization of geriatric welfare services. Further research, especially qualitative research, is needed to explore the depth of the problems of the elderly.

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