

Managing the health care needs of an aging population

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### **Overview**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is obvious that a lot of people are living longer than earlier and as the baby boomers get old, the number of the people who can be considered as the elderly or even the older adults in some quarters anticipated increasing in the coming years. Consequently, the increasing number of the elderly people in the society will pose major challenges to the society unless the issue can be effectively addressed before it becomes hard to control. On the other hand, health professionals such as nurses will be having a major role to play in the coming years in order to ensure that the health of the elderly people is effectively managed (Grady, 2011). This literature review focuses on the topic of health care of the elderly with specific focus on how health care of the elderly can be managed.

### **Challenges faced in managing the health care of the elderly**

As already pointed out, numerous challenges will be faced when managing the health care of the elderly. In this section of the literature review, some of the challenges that are currently faced and will be anticipated to be still faced in the future are expounded.

### **Shortage of Nurses**

As highlighted by Kimball and O'Neill (2002), there are two factors pertaining to the nursing workforce that affects the provision of health care to the elderly both in present times as well as in the future. To be precise, the two factors discussed by the scholars entail lack of enough registered nurses as well as the increasing numbers of aging nurses. Even though there are various reasons that have been put forward for the

shortage of registered nurses, Scanlon (2001) noted that the most common reasons are; low compensation that is offered to the nurses while compared to other careers thus leaving potential nurses to pursue other careers where they are assured of higher compensation, increased complexity of patient care and ease of access to other alternative careers. On the other hand, the increased turnover rates among nurses as pointed out by Scanlon can be attributed to the high rates of job dissatisfaction among the nurses. On a broader perspective, the low staffing levels among the nurses and the nursing aids results to poor quality health care as the nurses offering health care have a high number of patients to care for unlike would be the case if there was to be high numbers of registered nurses. Thus, considering that the number of the elderly is expected to increase in the future, there is a need for ideal measures to be put in place in order to ensure that the numbers of registered nurses country wide are increased.

### **Shortage of elderly care education and training**

As discussed by Kovner et al. (2002), even though a body of knowledge in view of elderly care in the context of elderly healthcare settings exists, it is a known fact that this specific knowledge is yet to be fully transmitted into primary nursing education and training programs. One of the major reasons why that is the case is due to shortage of competent individuals to teach geriatrics. For instance, from a study that involved some of the nursing schools in the country, only 42% of the nursing schools were found to have full time department that focused on geriatrics while 20% of the nursing schools have geriatric departments that were functioning on part time basis. On the

other hand, 38% of the nursing schools had no geriatric departments (Kovner et al. 2002). From that view, it is obvious that unless something is done urgently, the management of the elderly health care will become out of control in the near future.

### **Multiple Chronic illnesses**

Even though the number of years that people are living nowadays has increased, the chances of the elderly living with various chronic diseases are on the increase. Indeed, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010), it is estimated that nearly 80% of people who are over 65 years of age have one chronic illness or even more with the common chronic illness comprising of; diabetes, heart disease, and arthritis among others. On the other hand, such chronic illnesses tend to many a times entail discomfort, functional restrictions, and the requirements for long-term personal management of the conditions. Apart from that, the chronic illnesses do not have an impact on the quality of life of the elderly but are also of major economic costs to elderly. Considering that the number of the elderly is expected to skyrocket in the coming years, there is need for proper measures to be put in place in order to ensure that the elderly who are suffering from various chronic illness receive quality medical care that can help them age peacefully.

### **Measures to adopt to ensure effective management of health care needs of an aging population**

#### **Improve the nurses working environment**

As already pointed out, there is a very high turnover rates among the registered nurses mainly due to the fact that the registered nurses are not fully satisfied with their

jobs. In that view, there is a need to ensure that the ideal measures are adopted so that the working environment becomes more satisfying to the nurses as that is the only way through which the satisfaction rates of the nurses can be improved. Therefore, a national wide survey that involves the registered nurses and focuses on what the nurses believe should be done in order to improve the working environment should be carried out. Once the research has been carried out and the responses given analyzed, it would then be vital that the findings are implemented.

### **Provision of nursing care**

According to Mion (2003), the fact that there is a shortage of registered nurses countrywide demands that those who are in charge of nursing both in perspective of the service provision as well as the academia field reconsider models of care as well as the manner in which the care is provided. For instance, researching on how non-licensed personnel can undertake non-nursing roles to improve nurses' aptitude to deliver quality care is something that can be considered. For example, as noted by Mion (2003), a study that was carried out at Cleveland Clinic Foundation which is a one thousand bed tertiary care facility found that all the nurses that were working in the facility were all exasperated with the amount of time that it took then to getting equipment and supplies that they required in the process of giving care. In order to address that problem, Mion (2003) explained that a new role that was named equipment technician was created with the individual who was hired for the role been handed the responsibility of ensuring that all tools and equipment are in good working order and

that any supplies that might be needed by the supplies are readily available to the nurses. By adopting such changes, the nurses were satisfied while the quality of care that was to be provided by the nurses also improved. Therefore, it is crucial an audit of how nursing care is provided is carried out so that new models of quality care provisions can be found.

### **Establishing sufficient systems of long term care**

The anticipated increased in ageing population will obviously have key impacts on long-term care sector hence the reason there is a need for sufficient look into the issues so that both the health and the residential needs of the elderly population are looked into (Kendrick and Conway, 2006).

According to Kunemund and Rein (1999), there are a variety of alternatives that can be used in order to ensure that the mechanisms of long-term care are strengthened. Moreover, Kunemund and Rein (1999) has pointed out that the most significant entails assisted self-care as well as services that are home-based services implying that the elderly people elderly people could either remain in their own homes or an environment that they perceive to be similar to their homes. Thus, mechanisms of long-term care can provide assistance to those related to the elderly thus making it easier for them to continue to offer help and assistance to the elderly people without minimal interruptions to their individual health and economic commitments among other commitments.

A critical question in this case would be whether offering more formal assistance is going to diminish the family care or, contrary, it is going to enhance the provision of the care by the family. An analysis of this question from a research that was carried out from by Commonwealth Fund established that Germany and Austria have a very strong level of family assistance as well as a moderately substantial provision of formal help while in case of the United States the formal and family assistance was found to be weak (Kunemund and Rein, 1999). From those findings, the scholars came to the conclusions that formal and family support had to impact to either type of assistance that is offered. In addition to that, it can be explained that in another research, it was also found that formal and informal caregiver both tend to work together and do not in any way have a negative impact to either type of care that is afforded to the elderly (Penning and Keating, 2000). In case of the US, researchers noted that as far as the long term care of the elderly was concerned, there was an increased in the application of formal services with the increase mainly been attributed to the increased funding that was not available in the past (Penning and Keating, 2000).

### **Conclusions**

In conclusions, it can be explained that from the literature review, it is evident that there is a need for the topic of management of elderly health care to be addressed since the issue is now becoming more crucial than never before. From the literature review, it has been found that some of the challenges that needs to be addressed in order to ensure that the health care of the elderly is managed effectively entails; the lack

of enough registered nurses as well as nursing assistants, and the shortage of geriatric education and training at a time when experts in these field are highly needed with the two reasons having severe impact the elderly health care. In that view, it is vital that measures are adopted to address the situation prior to the situation getting out of control in a few years' time. Some of the measures that have been discussed that they can be adopted to address the issue comprise of work environment changes, review of the service delivery models, and establishment of sufficient systems of long term care. Nevertheless, the suggestions were made many years ago implying that their validity and feasibility might be questionable. It is in that view that this research was advanced so that the accurate and up to date measures that needs to be adopted in order to ensure that the health care needs of the elderly are effectively managed can be established.

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