

Canada's Aging Population

SHOULD STUDENTS BE WORRIED?

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THE PROBLEM

Seniors, aged 65 and over, are the fastest growing group in Canada and are projected to represent one-quarter of the population by 2051.¹ This demographic trend prompts a pressing need for a comprehensive care system to address the unique physical, functional, and social needs of a heterogeneous aging population.² In order for the health system to both adapt to meet these needs and maintain financial sustainability, there needs to be evidence-informed policies and sustainable reforms.³

CURRENT SOLUTIONS: NEED FOR CHANGE

Despite having comprised only 13.7% of Ontario's population in 2008, those aged 65 and over consumed approximately 44% of Ontario's provincial health spending.⁴ This places considerable pressure on a cash-strapped province already struggling to eliminate a \$14.4 billion deficit and to curb unsustainable spending.⁵ To provide high-quality and accessible healthcare services to older adults, Ontario had invested \$1.1 billion over four years, starting in 2007, with its Aging at Home Strategy.⁶ Through this strategy, Ontario's 14 Local Health

Integration Networks and Community Care Access Centers (CCACs) were allocated funding to enhance home care services, and consequently reduce the reliance of older adults on hospitals and long-term care homes.⁴ This strategy also aimed to reduce the number of "alternate level of care" patients – hospital inpatients – who can receive better quality care at long-term care facilities, at rehabilitation facilities, or in their own homes.⁷

However, investigations have found that thousands of seniors have insufficient access to home care, forcing them and their families to pay out-of-pocket for all or part of the services.⁸ Additionally, CCACs have been forced to cut back hours of care due to budget constraints.⁸ Between 2005 and 2008, there was a 129% increase in the wait times for placement into long-term care homes.⁴ As a result, thousands of seniors were forced to rely on hospital care, which cost the province approximately nine times the cost of home care per day.⁸

HOMEGROWN SOLUTIONS: WHAT IS BEING DONE AT MCMASTER

This pressing health challenge is being addressed at McMaster University with a number of evidence-informed initiatives. In November 2011, the McMaster Health Forum convened a stakeholder dialogue entitled "Organizing a Care System for Older Adults in Ontario", which discussed how to support optimal aging in Ontario. First, there is a



need for individualized self-management support for older adults and their families, outside of the medical model of acute care, in ways that support healthy aging. This includes physical activity and even the effective use of smart-phones, tablets and other technologies. Secondly, there is a need to coordinate integrated healthcare services to support healthy aging, such as modifying existing funding and remuneration models to support healthcare providers to better manage complex and chronic conditions. Lastly, there is the need to coordinate accessible and diverse community resources built around the needs of older adults.⁹

In the year since the dialogue, McMaster has made huge strides in addressing optimal aging, highlighted by the \$10 million Suzanne Labarge donation to McMaster to support research and knowledge translation focused on optimal aging. Part of the donation will be used towards a project led in part by the Forum, for the creation of the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal to make high-quality research evidence available to citizens, providers and policymakers in accessible languages.¹⁰ Additional projects funded by this donation include research into the benefits of yoga for older women

| FACTOR | EFFECT |
|-------------|---|
| PREVENTION | Though students might feel too young to worry about chronic disease and aging, it is never too early to engage in preventive measures to ensure optimal aging, such as regular activity and good nutrition. |
| FAMILY TIES | Students have parents or grandparents who are already, or will soon be, navigating the health system to aid in optimal aging, and by association students will be affected by the challenges their parents and grandparents may face with the health system. |
| MONEY | Students will soon be entering the workforce, and with greater responsibility comes higher taxes paid to the government. Thus, their money will finance the health system for older adults, and students should ensure they are informed to ensure its effective and efficient use. |

TABLE 1: How will the aging population affect students?

with arthritis, and better car designs for older drivers and passengers, among others.¹¹

CONCLUSION

There is a vast amount of research that has been and will continue to be done to support the aging population in making evidence-informed decisions and in receiving evidence-informed treatment, care and support. This paints a much less threatening future for Canada's older adults, who can feel confident in knowing they will receive the best possible care, and also for students who, as future members of the workforce, can be confident in knowing that research and proper planning can help offset the looming economic and social impacts of the aging population.

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