ABOUT SOME ASPECTS OF THE TRAINING OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS IN THE AREA OF GERIATRIC PRACTICE

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Keywords: healthcare professionals, educational needs, gerontology, geriatric practice

INTRODUCTION

In the UN expert’s report notes that the world is now 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 tripled to reach almost 2 billion in 2050 (6,9). Naturally, the rates of aging vary across countries and regions. The EU Commission estimates that the number of people between 65 and 79 living in the European Union will grow by 37% between 2010 and 2030. The number of people above 80 years of age will increase even more drastically: In 2030 their number will be 57% higher than it is today (3,4,5). Challenges for geriatric care in Bulgaria are significant. Bulgaria is the second most rapidly aging nation in the Eastern region after Ukraine (5). 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. Nearly half of hospitalized and ambulatory patients, two thirds of users of home and medical care, are over 60 years of age. The tendency is to increase needs and demands of society for quality health and social care of adults, carried out by competent professionals (3,7). In relation to this, of particular importance is the question of the professional qualification of the medical personnel, which provides these people with health care.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The main objective of this study was to establishes and analyses the specific difficulties of the health professionals in providing medical and social assistance for old people, and to specifies their educational needs in the field of gerontology and geriatric practice (2).

The study was carried out among 62 health professionals, who studing in the specialty “Management of healthcare” and 800 health professionals from hospitals and nursing homes throughout the country. The sample was randomly selected.

To achieve the goals, 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. 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 questionnaire concerning the professional qualification of the medical specialists, which provides elderly with health care. Questionnaires are written and anonymous, semi-structured interviews, statistical methods for the processing and analysis of raw data.

RESULTS

The study identify and clarify the specific difficulties and educational needs in the field of gerontology and geriatric practice of health professionals in providing medical and social assistance for elderly. Need for specialized staff to perform care / especially for adults with psycho-geriatric problems / is increasing. 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.

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.

Determined are the main reasons for the difficulties of health professionals in taking care for their patients. Medi-
cal specialists often lack the necessary knowledge and understanding into medico-social questions and problems posed by 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 dementia 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.

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

**DISCUSSION**

The results relate directly on elements of at least the following major problems in the field of health care for older people [1,2]:

1. **Lack of specialized knowledge and skills for working with older people, which creates significant difficulties for medical staff or quality of geriatric care rendered.**

The results from the study pointed out that a big share of the specific problems of the respondents were related to the lack of the necessary knowledge and communication skills for working with adult patients. They may be overcome to a great extent provided that the health professionals:

- learn about age changes in mentality and behavior;
- learn HOW to communicate with him/her, i.e. if they adapt themselves to the communicative skills of the patient determined by the illness;
- learn about “dealing with death”. The elderly individual, whether terminally or chronically ill, may trigger in us a sense of vulnerability and feelings of fear.
- learn about elder abuse. The professionals receive further education to recognise the problem and to provide support to the victims and to their families.

2. **Ageism events 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:

- Neglect the health needs of older patients;
- Deficit of empathic attitude in carrying out the necessary care;
- Absence or lack of desire to improve the training of medical specialists in geriatric practice, which adversely affects the quality of care;
- Cancel or postpone medical care for elderly patients and others.

3. **Difficulties in taking care of demented patients.** Serious communication problems were proved between the patients and the caretakers. The results from the study pointed out that a big share of the specific problems of the respondents were related to the lack of communication skills with demented patients. This was to a great extent due to the lack of information on the characteristics of the process of dementia as well as on the concurrent personality changes in the patient. It was proved out that only 24% of the respondents were informed about the realities determined by dementia.

The results of the study justify the urgent need for an expansion of the educational capacity in the spheres of Gerontology and Geriatrics for healthcare professionals. First steps for overcoming the some specific problems in the area of geriatric practice:

1. Increasing the capacity of public health through better training of a sufficient number of professionals and more stable structures for health services.

For several years in Bulgaria geriatric medicine is included in the list of specialties in the healthcare system as the main profile specialty fields of internal medicine, general medicine and social medicine and health management, but noted interest, lack of motivation doctors development in the field of geriatrics. Faculty of Public Health (FOS) at the Medical University - Sofia provides competent gerontological training in student learning and postgraduate training of health personnel. Despite the above forms of training in gerontology and geriatrics offered in recent years in Bulgaria, there is an urgent need to expand educational opportunities in those scientific fields for all health and social workers who provide medical and social assistance to elderly.

Providing modern, comparable to European standards of educational training of competent professionals providing quality health and social care of older people in Bulgaria can be done if such actions be implemented:

- Disclosure of the Department of Gerontology at the Medical Universities and / or Faculty of Public Health (8);
- Introduce mandatory training programs in gerontology students and postgraduate training of health professionals and social related problems in older people;
- Provide continuing education training programs in gerontology for health and social care staff, aimed at expanding and updating their professional competence;
- Requirement for presence of certificate course in Gerontology from all persons having health and social care for older people.

Overcoming the distance learning process - a practice by using innovative approach to learning through experience. The most critical location in the chain of learning is the unit linking individual learning with the application of learning in the workplace.

2. Enhanced media involvement to overcome the negative effects of ageism and creating a positive public attitude towards the elderly and aging workforce.

Solving the problem of social exclusion, health status of older people and their effective involvement in the economic and social life of society is crucial for both the individual and his family and for our country (2).
CONCLUSION

The number of old people in Europe/and Bulgaria/ 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. Politicians at the local, regional, national and international levels, the population, the economy, the health and social professionals, interest groups, non profit organisations and many others have to meet the challenges of demographic change together, and work together to ensure the future of our established health and social model.

Bulgaria is confronting the challenges of health and social care of the aging population. It is embracing the opportunities to initiate policies and related measures to meet these challenges. The join of Bulgaria to the European Union calls for the equalization of the criteria used by the EU and our country to govern the institutions, dealing with the implementation of geriatric care, to meet the recommended requirements for the care of the elderly. The changes include specialist training in gerontology and geriatrics, and were an essential first step to bridge the gap between the real and the future needs. Adequate education and training of such professionals is a necessary first step toward a more compassionate, humanistic, and dignified care of the elderly patients.

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