

Future of Health and Long-term Care of Older Persons in India

Dr A B Dey

Professor and Head, Department of Geriatric Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi

In the year 2051, every fifth Indian will be a senior citizen and as a group older people will outnumber children below fourteen years of age. Long life is an achievement for an individual and indicates the success of socioeconomic progress of the State. All good things have their draw backs. Similarly, a large ageing population, an achievement by all standards, also poses challenges to all institutions of the civil society including the health system. Current policies and programmes of Government of India such as National Policy on Older Persons, Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act 2007; and National Programme for Health Care of the Elderly; and initiatives of State Governments such as Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, look good on paper, but very little is perceptible on the ground. Implementation of all these initiatives has been slow due to multiple factors. Lack of resources, bureaucratic lethargy and lack of touch with ground realities in a centralized planning; are some of the important factors among them. Participation of private sector in health care is increasing steadily since adoption of neo-liberal economic policies in 1990s. It appears that most of the health and long term care for older persons in foreseeable future will be provided by private sector. The role of public sector institutions will possibly be limited to human resource development and establishment of evidence base through rigorous research.

There has been a shift in state policies in welfare sector, since the current National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government has taken over in 2014. There is a perceptible decline in social sector allocation and a policy shift towards encouragement of public private partnership. This leaves the role of the State to mostly regulatory role for services. In old age care this will be reflected in development of long term care institutions in private sector, which will require establishment of regulation for standards and quality control. Opening of insurance sector to foreign equity may help development of health insurance and long term care insurance in the same pattern as New Pension Scheme on early 2000s. It may be anticipated that sooner than expected, more effective health insurance systems would evolve to reduce the pressure of out of pocket spending by families for health care. This may help families to take care of older family members without the financial stress.

Institutional model of care may not be a popular model in India due to socio-cultural factors. For profit-old age homes and retirement housing schemes may attract those who do not have or live with children and have resources to afford such living arrangements. Use of various home care options are developing now and may be useful to this group of senior citizens. In health services, Geriatric Medicine will soon be a preferred specialty of care for older persons and a career option for young medical graduates as has been revealed in a report from National Health Service of United Kingdom. It is expected that in near future private corporate hospitals will develop geriatric services with home care component to provide a complete package of care. Old age care can be a business opportunity. Young entrepreneurs have shown interest to develop innovative models of old age care which are profitable and, sustainable as well as acceptable to older citizens.

The *National Health Policy 2017* in paragraph 4.6 deals with senior citizens and is reproduced as under.

“The National Health Policy commits itself to culturally appropriate community centered solutions to meet the health needs of the ageing community in addition to compliance with constitutional obligations as per the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007. The policy recognizes the growing need for palliative and rehabilitative care for all geriatric illnesses and advocates the continuity of care across all levels.”

While the context and concerns of the National Health Policy on the emerging demographic scenario is well intentioned, the content does not appear to be adequate. Development of effective interventions on this policy will show the way forward in health and long term care of older persons in India. In these changing circumstances, some pressing issues require urgent attention. Rapid pace of ageing of the population in India requires review of policies and programs for health and long term care in old age. Implementation of existing programmes has not been optimum enough to impact the lives of older persons in India. Urgent action is required to improve grass root level implementation. Old age care remains poorly developed in the health system. Effective implementation of the National Programme for Health Care of Elderly needs to be carried out. Skill up-gradation of private sector health professionals, who provide substantial care to older persons, is a priority requirement. Financing of health and long term care in old age has not received adequate attention of the State. Development of health financing system through subsidies and insurance needs urgent attention. Home care is attracting attention of entrepreneurs and can expand as an industry apart from providing relief to care giver. Long term institutional care is virtually non-existent in India. There is necessity for developing these services, notwithstanding the need for strengthening community based care for older persons.