

EDITORIAL

Mental & social dimensions in geriatric population: Need of the hour

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Ageing is inevitable; it is a natural phenomenon and has its own dynamics, which is beyond human control. Sir James Sterling Ross commented that “you don’t heal old age, you protect it and you promote it” these are the principles of Preventive Medicine¹. The Indian elderly population is currently the second largest in the world². The proportion of elderly population in India rose from 5.6% in 1961 to 7.5% in 2001³ & it will rise to 9% by 2016⁴.

Within the next five years, for the first time in human history, the number of adults aged 65 and over will outnumber children under the age of 5. By 2050, these older adults will outnumber children under the age of 14⁵. The world will have more people who live to see their 80s or 90s than ever before. The number of people aged 80 years or older, for example, will have almost quadrupled to 395 million between 2000 and 2050. Between 2000 and 2050, the proportion of the world’s population over 60 years will double from about 11% to 22%. The absolute number of people aged 60 years and over is expected to increase from 605 million to 2 billion over the same period⁵.

Every year, World Health Day is celebrated on 7th April to mark the anniversary of the founding of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948. The topic of World Health Day in 2012 is “Ageing and Health” with the theme “Good health adds life to years”. Ageing concerns each and every one of us whether young or old, male or female, rich or poor, no matter where we live.

Ageing is a complex phenomenon that is accompanied by physiological, psychological and social changes contributing to declining health status. Mental disorders have got high prevalence and low priority in most of the countries around the world. Majority of depressive disorders remains undiagnosed and untreated because of a

wrong belief that it is a part of ageing and is a social stigma. In India, Community based studies on mental disorder have revealed that the prevalence of depression varies between 13 to 46% among the elderly population^{6,7}.

As per the preamble of constitution of the World Health Organization (1948). Health is defined as “Health is a state of complete physical, mental & social wellbeing & not merely an absence of disease or infirmity”. Therefore, keeping in mind all the components of this definition i.e. physical, mental & social, we find that the focus nowadays is only on the physical part, whereas the mental and social components which are very essential for leading a dignified, respectable and stress free life particularly for an elderly are given very less emphasis.

The WHO in its recent document has emphasized that healthy ageing is linked to health in earlier stages of life starting from the womb till the adult life i.e. under nutrition in the womb, ARI in childhood as well as obesity/overweight during adolescence. The authors are of the opinion that the other side of the coin has been missed i.e. once the individual has entered the geriatric age group there are other factors which come into play (even though he/she may be physically healthy) which “Add life” or “Subtract life” to the remaining years of his/her life span. In the geriatric age group the “mental and social” dimensions of the WHO definition of health should be given priority. Elderly person, besides suffering from physical health related problems, suffer most from severe neglect & isolation. They feel very hurt and dejected when they find their own son not consulting her/him in family matters especially concerning her grandchildren whom they are very fond of. In addition to the financial requirements, there is an emotional craving, desire to be liked, loved, cared for and made to feel wanted by their family members. Social and emotional requirements

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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. They find it difficult to tackle loneliness and isolation, therefore the associated feeling of sadness and depression inevitably creeps in. Elderlies want to lead their remaining life in a respectable and dignified manner with their children and grandchildren. In a study conducted by Khan et al⁸ it was observed that social isolation was felt more by the elderly by the upper class which causes more feeling of loneliness and neglect in them. Keeping the above facts in view, the authors are of the opinion that there is immediate need for creating awareness among community, (especially the urban) to give due regards to the feelings and emotions of the elderlies and this should begin right from our own homes. The world health day of this year should be used as an opportunity to mark the starting point of this awareness which should be continued throughout the year. This step will go a long way in enabling the elderly persons to lead a respectable & dignified life.

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