

Elderly individuals dependent on caregivers

The first issue of *Revista Ciência & Saúde Coletiva* of 2021 (26.1) is dedicated to one of the most neglected groups of Brazilians, namely elderly individuals who have lost their autonomy and rely on care provided by third parties. The articles focus on the elderly/caregiver dyad, which predominantly involves female caregivers since more than 90% of those who assist people in this stage of life and in this condition, in Brazil and around the world, are women. They are the ones who fulfill the sublime and difficult mission of caring, the most important in human life, according to Heidegger¹, albeit so underappreciated as shown by the Oxfam report² presented at the World Economic Forum.

The salient demographic factor in the world currently is the marked increase in longevity. In Brazil, the population count for December 2019 shows that there are already more than 24.1 million people over the age of 60 in the country. And the unprecedented increase in those over 80 years of age has become an irreversible fact, this being the most vulnerable group in social terms and from the health standpoint³.

Although the majority of elderly Brazilians are healthy, a not insignificant percentage reaches old age requiring the assistance of others, either for social reasons or for flagrant physical and musculoskeletal deficiencies, or mental illness. It is with a focus on this group, acknowledged as being “fragile” or “dependent,” that the results of a qualitative survey carried out in eight capitals of the country that included 175 people, 64 of whom are elderly, 27 are formal caregivers and 84 are family caregivers, are presented. The study addressed an analysis of the situation, representations, perceptions, desires and proposals of the sundry actors involved. The focus was always on the experiences and insights of formal and informal caregivers and the elderly when they were able to express themselves. There are also three articles in the edition dealing with international policies on the issue.

The results show that this research has many points in common with other national and international studies. For example, care work is normally a female task – although, exceptionally, some highly dedicated children and spouses were interviewed. A point that might be curious if it were not so recurrent, is the fact that the caregiver is, in most Brazilian homes, at the same time, the domestic helper.

The articles on state policy place the main emphasis on Europe, Canada and the United States. In Europe, the process of protecting those who live longest, particularly those who need caregivers, is treated as part of the fabric of social solidarity that brings together and involves the State, subnational entities, society, families and the elderly themselves⁴.

Brazil is at a stage that calls for important decisions regarding the recent demands brought about by an aging population. Besides the demographic increase, there are important consequences that affect the elderly, particularly in family organization and in cultural and lifestyle changes.

The action of the Brazilian State in the drafting of proposals that benefit dependent elderly individuals and their caregivers is almost nonexistent. Science is progressing faster than government, as there are already many articles by national authors on the topic. The differential of this edition is that it brings together under the same cover, the results of a survey carried out in several locations around the country with the strategic objective of highlighting the need for action by the State and Society to tackle such an urgent issue! The burden of caring for the elderly who have dedicated their lives to the country and deserve recognition and gratitude when they need an extended protective hand in their time of need cannot be left on the shoulders of their families alone!

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