

Ensuring the health and well-being of the elderly: challenges for today and tomorrow



The *Revista Brasileira de Geriatria e Gerontologia-RBGG* (Brazilian Journal of Geriatrics and Gerontology) is entering a new phase, expanding its role in the production and diffusion of scientific knowledge in the field of human aging. We are already part of the select group of Brazilian academic journals that make up the SciELO library, and our aim now is to increase our dialogue with researchers from around the world.

Not only are we launching an exclusive RBGG website, but beginning with this edition, the journal will also be available in an English language version. In addition, RBGG will continue to grow – next year, we will switch to being published on a bimonthly basis. All this without neglecting our role of presenting challenging and contemporary scientific proposals, in search of improving the quality of life of the elderly.

It is our belief that the current provision of health services for the elderly is outdated. Elderly care has become fragmented, with specialist consultations, medical exams and other procedures multiplying to excess. This overburdens the system, has a negative financial impact at all levels, and does not generate significant benefits in quality of life.

We are stuck in the era when the population of Brazil was young and susceptible to acute illnesses. But today the scenario is different: Brazil has an aging population, affected by chronic diseases. The demographic projection for the coming years shows that this aging process will intensify. Remaining in thrall to current logic, therefore, means we will continue along the road of increased spending and reduced well-being.

The National Health Agency and the World Health Organization highlight the urgent need for changes to the paradigms of care for the elderly, with creative and innovative structures accompanied by alternative strategies, so that the advances in science we have achieved over the years are put to effective use.

Identifying and treating disease continues to be the goal of the modern geriatrician, but this is no longer enough. Knowing how the elderly perform their daily tasks, and their degree of satisfaction in doing so, requires the doctor to investigate both basic functions – such as independence in feeding, bathing, walking and personal hygiene – and those that are more complex, like work, leisure and spirituality. It is a priority to use this knowledge to make the necessary transition from the clinical care model to a more prevention focused approach.

Our aim is to inform healthcare policymakers about contemporary and resolute models with a favorable cost-benefit balance. The basic purpose of such models is to provide a high standard of health and quality of life for the elderly and their families, while recognizing that during this stage of life illnesses caused by advancing years, and a subsequent increase in fragility, can lead to the loss of just such quality of life.

It is believed that three factors will increase the number of elderly persons needing long-term care. Firstly, the significant growth in the number of very old people over the next 30 years will result in a greater absolute number of frail elderly individuals. Secondly, changes in the status of women, and social and family values will continue to affect the availability of family support for this population (projections for Brazil estimate that the number of people cared for by non-family members, or in other words professional caregivers, in 2010 will double by 2020 and be five times greater in 2040). Third, risk factors that in the past mainly affected men, especially the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, as well as work-related stress, will also affect women.

Consequently, any contemporary policy for the sector should prioritize healthy aging, the maintenance and improvement of functional capacity, disease prevention, and the recovery of health and functional capabilities. We therefore invite our readers, researchers and professionals involved in the varied contexts and praxis of the field of gerontology to embrace these new contemporary challenges, in order to create a quality healthcare model that is practical and sustainable for our society. RBGG invites you to become part of the ongoing, relevant dialogue that surrounds the issues set out here, as well as other challenges related to the field of human aging.

Renato Veras
Editor