

## CARE FOR THE ELDERLY: NATIONAL POLICY AND NURSING TRAINING

*Maria Helena Palucci Marziale<sup>1</sup>*

In Brazil, epidemiological data<sup>(1)</sup> indicate the growth of the elderly population, which results from decreased mortality and fecundity rates. In combination with socioeconomic inequalities, these changes are significantly affecting the age structure of the population, giving rise to problems in need of an immediate solution, in order to guarantee that elderly persons will have the opportunity to preserve their physical and mental health and moral, intellectual and spiritual improvement, in autonomous and dignified conditions.

Studies<sup>(2)</sup> have demonstrated that, at the turn of the century, 1 out of every 20 residents in Brazil was an aged person and that, twenty years later, this ratio will be 1 out of every 13. Hence, the problems surrounding this part of the population have deserved the interests of public institutions, social policy makers, universities and society in general.

Last October, the Brazilian government passed the Law of the Aged<sup>(3)</sup> with a view to guiding actions aimed at guaranteeing the protection of life and health to persons aged 60 years or older. This document determines on the rights granted to aged persons. Article 3<sup>rd</sup> of the above mentioned law deserves to be highlighted: "It is the obligation of the family, the community, society and the public power to guarantee that the right to life, health, food, education, culture, sport, leisure, work, citizenship, dignity, respect, family and community life is put into practice for the elderly, with absolute priority", since it presents the established actions as a whole.

The national policy that was adopted has deserved cheers and recognition. Nevertheless, criticism has been formulated to the prohibition against health insurance price readjustment for people older than 60 years, due to the fact that the private sector is not legally obliged (in spite of the moral obligation) to offer privileges to a specific class or category<sup>(4)</sup>, and also against the lack of strict penalties for those who mistreat aged person, considering that, according to analysts<sup>(5)</sup>, the Law will permit that the penal code is more beneficial to the accused than to the victim, since the person breaking the law who receives a maximal penalty of one year will not be put in jail. The elderly were optimistic about the approval of the Law, although they are waiting to observe the effects of the new policy<sup>(5)</sup> in practice.

What the health area is concerned, we highlight the determination about the training of human resources to work at geriatric units. These professionals need specialized training in Geriatrics and Social Gerontology in order to provide adequate care to this clientele.

According to article 18 of the same law<sup>(3)</sup>, "health institutions must attend to the minimal criteria for attending the aged person's needs, promoting professional training as well as orientations to caretakers, family members and self-help groups".

Health personnel training is essential in order to render adequate care to the aged. Thus, academic attention needs to be drawn to the formation and training of human resources in nursing, in order to deal with the phenomenon of aging (Gerontology) and the sickness-health process of the aged (Geriatrics).

Nursing research has disclosed the need for human resource training to render care to this population, in the professional sphere as well as among communities and families. In this sense, higher education institutions, which are responsible for the formation of opinions and professionals, have been working through study groups and research

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<sup>1</sup> Editor of Latin American Journal of Nursing, Associate Professor of the University of São Paulo at Ribeirão Preto College of Nursing - WHO Collaborating Centre for Nursing Research Development, e-mail: marziale@eerp.usp.br

development. This subject is also implemented in undergraduate and graduate courses which, besides using research, invest in relational strategies with aged persons, in different contexts of society, with a view to broadening the approach to the aging process and to old age<sup>(6)</sup>.

Considering research studies as essential instruments for transforming professional nursing practice, the Latin-American Journal of Nursing has been playing its role by publishing articles that offer elements to contribute to the training of Nursing professionals in this specialization area under development.

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