

Challenges Faced by Elderly Population: An Overview

Lt Col Dr. Regina. P.F.*

Abstract

India is a country of vast physical and cultural diversity, where 72% of the world's second-largest population resides in rural areas experiencing various levels of socio-economic change. The population segment over 60 years of age is expanding, introducing distinct challenges. Often perceived as frail, the elderly depend on younger family members for support, with elderly women especially reliant on their male offspring. Key issues affecting the elderly include inadequate physical infrastructure, insufficient companionship, mental health concerns, lack of financial resources, and limited emergency services. Common health ailments among the elderly are cardiovascular diseases and problems with mobility. The family, community, and stakeholders has to take necessary measures to minimize the problems. Awareness to the younger generation regarding elder care has a vital role.

Keywords: elderly, problems, health issues, dependent, challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The percentage of the population aged 60 and above is growing, currently making up 10% of the population, with projections suggesting it will reach 19% by 2050. This increase is largely attributed to improved life expectancy resulting from better hygiene, nutrition, healthcare, rising incomes, and enhanced social security measures. Currently, the average life expectancy in India stands at 68.11 years, expected to increase to 73.3 years by 2050. Despite these advances, the elderly still encounter significant health issues and declining mental health, posing challenges that are both physical and sociological in nature.

The rising elderly population in India can also be attributed to declining mortality and birth rates, with couples opting for later marriages and fewer children. This demographic shift will significantly impact the economy, as the working-age population, contributing to consumer demand, dwindles, creating a pressing demand for geriatric care services and products such as hospitals and mobility aids like wheelchairs. Alongside, the elderly grapple with various challenges, including inadequate physical infrastructure, social isolation, mental health concerns, limited financial support, and insufficient emergency response services [1].

Review of Literature

In India, the elderly face a unique set of challenges that stem from a combination of socio-economic factors, cultural norms, and healthcare infrastructure limitations. These challenges often exacerbate the vulnerabilities of older adults and require targeted interventions to address. With advancements in healthcare and better living standards contributing to increased life spans, the percentage of older adults in the population is steadily growing. While longevity is undoubtedly a cause for celebration, it also brings forth a myriad of challenges that need to be addressed [2]. Aging is an unavoidable biological process, viewed as the phase when individuals outlive their active adult

*Author for Correspondence

Lt Col Dr. Regina. P.F.
E-mail: tlvc901@gmail.com

Associate Professor, Department of Nursing, P.K. Das College of Nursing, Panayur, Ottapalam, Palakkad, Kerala

Received Date: April 21, 2024
Accepted Date: May 01, 2024
Published Date: May 10, 2024

Citation: Lt Col Dr. Regina. P.F. Challenges faced by Elderly Population: An overview. International Journal of Geriatric Nursing. 2024; 7(1): 15–20p.

roles, often marked by a decline in productivity. Due to technological progress and modernization, there have been reductions in mortality rates alongside increases in nutritional awareness and healthcare improvements, all contributing to a longer life expectancy. This study seeks to investigate the difficulties experienced by the elderly population in India. These challenges include deteriorating health, retirement, financial insecurity, loneliness, and increased dependency on others [3].

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

The primary issues addressed in this research paper encompass social, economic, psychological, health-related, criminal, abusive, and various other miscellaneous challenges.

Social Problems

In the current era, technology has become widespread, with individuals from diverse age groups, demographics, and backgrounds incorporating it into their daily activities. However, elderly individuals typically have limited knowledge about technology usage; they may only engage in basic activities such as making phone calls, watching television, or listening to music and religious content on radio or mobile devices. This suggests a lack of familiarity with performing various tasks using technology. Studies have shown that individuals often do not recognize the onset of old age when they reach 60 years, indicating a lack of preparedness for aging [4].

Economic Problems

Elderly individuals from underprivileged, marginalized, and economically disadvantaged communities often face economic challenges. These issues arise when they hold low-income, minority positions that do not provide sufficient funds to cover their basic needs. In India, financial difficulties are prevalent among the elderly, particularly because they are unable to generate income. The lack of adequate savings to cover medical bills and other household duties further exacerbates their financial struggles. Ensuring social and financial security for these older adults is critically important.

Psychological Problems

Psychological issues among the elderly arise from feelings of loneliness, isolation, powerlessness, and a sense of purposelessness. Individuals are integral parts of society, where they fulfill various roles and responsibilities primarily based on their occupations. For example, a teacher contributes to the growth and development of individuals through education, while a medical doctor provides healthcare services. As individuals age, they acquire wisdom and values, which they pass on to their families and communities. Elderly individuals play a crucial role in guiding and positively influencing the younger generations, thereby contributing to the advancement of both their families and society.

Dementia

Dementia encompasses more than simple memory loss and affects approximately five percent of the population aged 65 and above. Those affected by dementia often exhibit symptoms such as short-term memory loss, difficulty finding words, challenges with problem-solving, struggles in performing complex daily tasks, apathy, irritability, apraxia, reduced speech clarity, impaired mobility, and physical agitation. The primary issues manifest in consciousness, orientation, memory, cognition, attention, and behavior [5].

Depression

Elderly individuals may occasionally experience feelings of sadness and despair. However, if these emotions endure for a prolonged duration, they are categorized as depression, a condition more prevalent among older individuals compared to younger and middle-aged adults. Affected older adults often adopt a negative view of life, prefer solitude, and find little joy in interacting with others.

Social Exclusion

Social exclusion among the elderly occurs when they face a lack of employment opportunities and are without the presence of family, relatives, or friends. Essentially, when they lack social interactions, they encounter social exclusion, leading to both psychological and health issues.

Anxiety and Phobias

Anxiety and phobias, stemming from various causes, contribute to psychological issues in older adults. Stress can present itself through psychological and physical symptoms. When people experience stress about certain issues, feelings of anxiety and fear often emerge, triggered by multiple factors.

Loneliness

Describing a persistent and troubling condition, it disrupts the mental states of individuals, adversely affecting their physical and psychological health. Elderly individuals seek to alleviate feelings of isolation, often by fostering close connections with family members, particularly children and grandchildren, who offer them support and aid.

Role of the Family

The family's role is crucial in addressing the needs of elderly relatives. They offer various forms of support and assistance, aiding seniors in mitigating their challenges. When family members display compassion, care, and thoughtfulness, they offer moral and emotional assistance to the elderly, along with addressing their financial needs, healthcare, security, and attentively listening to their concerns and providing practical solutions. Their support becomes crucial, particularly during instances of illness or health issues that commonly arise with aging.

Health Problems

In India, elderly individuals face a combination of medical issues, encompassing both communicable and non-communicable diseases, which are exacerbated by deteriorating sensory functions such as vision and hearing. Reduced immunity and age-related physiological alterations contribute to a heightened prevalence of communicable ailments among the elderly [5].

As individuals age, they commonly face a range of health issues. The elderly may suffer from visual and hearing impairments, speech difficulties, a reduction in vocabulary, joint pain, diabetes, high or low blood pressure, neurological conditions, urological issues, muscular diseases, cancers, and other ailments. Additionally, stress is considered a significant factor that impacts both the physical health and psychological state of older adults. When people experience stress, they require support and guidance from others. Social workers are tasked with providing suitable assistance to help ease their stress. Effective stress relief methods encompass activities like yoga, meditation, engaging in physical exercises, and fostering positive thoughts [6].

Inappropriate Dietary Intake

It is crucial for elderly individuals to maintain a balanced and nourishing diet that includes carbohydrates, minerals, proteins, vitamins, and fats. It is crucial to maintain sufficient consumption of vital minerals such as iron, potassium, and calcium. Obtaining proper nutrition is essential to prevent deficiencies and associated health issues among the elderly population. Unsuitable dietary habits are recognized as a significant factor contributing to health problems and illnesses in older adults.

Accidents

Accidents are factors that impact individual health and can range from minor to major. These incidents might have either a temporary or permanent effect on a person's well-being. For example, someone involved in an accident might temporarily or permanently struggle with mobility. Generally, minor accidents tend to temporarily affect an individual's health. However, when elderly people experience accidents, it often also influences their mental outlook.

Lack of Physical Activities

Research indicates that elderly individuals, both men and women, often visit parks in the morning to participate in physical activities and socialize with friends. They engage in activities like yoga, meditation, and walking while interacting with others. This morning routine of physical activity and socializing is considered crucial for maintaining the health and well-being of the elderly.[7]

Boredom

Boredom occurs when one lacks motivation to engage in meaningful or productive activities. This situation arises when a person struggles to utilize their time productively, often resulting from enforced idleness, withdrawal from obligations, and a lack of personal objectives. When individuals are not engaged in productive activities, they may experience physical and mental decline. Upon reaching the age of 60 and older, after leading active lives, they utilize their skills and expertise to improve their quality of life.

Other Problems

It is essential for elderly individuals to manage their daily activities effectively, including dressing appropriately for the weather. In winter, for instance, it is crucial for them to wear sufficient woolen clothing to stay warm, especially when stepping outside. Additionally, stress and anxiety are significant factors that can negatively impact health, with high blood pressure often resulting from chronic stress.

Crime against the Aged People

Crime and the fear of becoming victims of crime are significant sources of concern for the elderly population. Their vulnerability stems from their advanced age and physical frailty, which often leave them unable to defend themselves. Moreover, their limited financial resources and tendency to reside in densely populated areas further expose them to the risk of crime and violence. Among the elderly, particularly those aged 80 and above, health issues are prevalent, making them more susceptible to criminal acts. The crimes frequently perpetrated against them include theft, robbery, burglary, fraud, verbal and physical abuse, assault, sexual assault, and homicide [8].

Abuse of Aged People

In today's world, abuse against elderly individuals is increasingly prevalent. The different types of abuse have been outlined as follows: Verbal, physical, financial, social, emotional, spousal abuse, medical abuse, and sexual abuse. It is very shocking to realize that at times the elders are not aware about these abuses.

Neglect

Elderly individuals often feel neglected when they are not properly recognized or communicated with by their family, or when caregivers view them as a burden and fail to provide adequate care. This neglect, particularly from family members, can lead to feelings of sadness and depression, adversely affecting their health.

Abandonment or Desertion

Elderly individuals often struggle to meet their own needs and require support, which can be provided by family members or other caregivers. When family members and caregivers prioritize their own tasks over the needs of elderly individuals, they may end up neglecting or abandoning them.

Loss of Respect

Disregarding the elderly is considered a type of mistreatment, with effective communication being a key aspect of showing respect. When individuals fail to communicate with them respectfully, it is seen as a lack of regard for their dignity.

Systemic Abuse

Systemic abuse occurs when elderly people in institutions face discrimination and are deprived of equal rights and opportunities because of their age. It occurs when social and economic policies result in unfair distribution of resources and discrimination in service provision. In India, measures have been introduced to address the needs of the elderly and promote their welfare. However, if they are deprived of necessary facilities due to various challenges, it constitutes systemic abuse.

Scapegoating

Scapegoating often involves elderly individuals, particularly women, being unfairly blamed for various misfortunes impacting others. These can include natural disasters like earthquakes, droughts, floods, or epidemics. There are documented cases where women have been ostracized, tortured, harassed, abused, and even killed because they are held responsible for issues that have adversely affected community life.

Community Violence

Community violence negatively impacts elderly individuals by generating feelings of anxiety and fear, leading to heightened insecurity and direct acts of violence. Criminal violence, a form of community violence, includes a range of detrimental activities such as physical attacks, theft, robbery, sexual assault, homicide, vandalism, juvenile crimes, drug-related acts of violence, and gang conflicts. These criminal activities detrimentally affect households and communities, limiting access to essential services, healthcare, and social interaction for elderly residents.

Political Violence and Armed Conflict

Political violence and armed conflicts deeply affect elderly people, either directly or by causing forced displacement. Such conflicts typically result in extensive destruction, including loss of homes, property, and access to essential services. Elderly people, particularly those suffering from illnesses, health complications, or mobility issues, often receive humanitarian aid sporadically. Additionally, they may face marginalization when it comes to the allocation of food and healthcare resources.

Measures to Minimize the Problems

- Elderly individuals derive social support from family, friends, and caregivers, which aids them in managing abusive situations. Effective engagement in communication with seniors by these supporters can significantly reduce their stress and anxiety.
- *Treatment and follow-up*: The elderly will have multiple health issues. Consulting doctors, continuing medications and follow-up is a must. The family members or care taker must do the needful.
- *Resilience*: Elderly individuals who have endured abuse and mistreatment often develop coping mechanisms and strategies for survival. While some simply manage to endure abusive conditions, others cultivate a capacity for tolerance and strengthen their religious convictions to help them cope with such experiences.
- *Role of Religion*: Older adults often have firm religious convictions. They commonly visit sacred sites every day, find joy in hearing religious hymns, and watch religious broadcasts on television. They hold the belief that their strong religious convictions will help reduce their stress and anxiety.
- Counseling involves conversations about various issues people face, during which experts and professionals offer advice and solutions tailored to these challenges.
- *Safety place*: If the conditions within their home environment are not conducive, elderly individuals may choose to relocate to safer locations.
- Encouraging seniors to utilize their skills and abilities requires perseverance and consistent effort. When these individuals are not mobile or able to employ their talents, they often experience boredom. Conversely, when they engage in productive activities, such as offering free tutoring to children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, they feel more fulfilled and active [9].
- *General awareness*: In contemporary society, laws and regulations have been put in place to safeguard the well-being of elderly individuals. If they encounter mistreatment or abuse from their own children, they have the option to seek legal recourse. They possess the right to remove their children from the household or relocate themselves if subjected to any form of mistreatment. It is essential for seniors to be informed about existing laws and policies, as well as organizations that offer assistance and support to those facing abuse [10].

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The 2011 National Policy on Senior Citizens acknowledges the valuable contribution of older individuals to society and aims to facilitate their full integration into various aspects of community life. It seeks to offer socio-economic assistance through initiatives such as income-generating activities, insurance, and pension programs, as well as fostering a culture of familial care for seniors. The range of challenges faced by seniors encompasses difficulties in adapting to modern technologies, traditional mindsets, interpersonal conflicts, boredom, and a lack of awareness about geriatric issues. While some of these issues may persist without immediate solutions, preventive measures should encompass a holistic approach to geriatric care, including education on common problems and preventive measures, healthy dietary practices, physical activity, and mental well-being promotion. Within families, it is imperative for parents to instill values of elder care in their children, and integrating this aspect into educational curricula can further reinforce such values. Ultimately, laws and policies alone cannot instill familial respect and values; it is the responsibility of parents to imbue these principles from a young age.

REFERENCES

1. World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision, Highlights. New York: United Nations Population Division; 2003. (ESA/P/WP. 180). Available online at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/files/documents/2020/Jan/un_2002_world_population_prospects-2002_revision_volume-ii.pdf
2. Dhar HL. Emerging geriatric challenge. *J Assoc Physicians India*. 2005; 53: 867–872p.
3. I Rajan SI, Sarma PS, Mishra US. Demography of Indian aging, 2001–2051. *J Aging Soc Policy*. 2003; 15(2–3): 11–30p. doi: 10.1300/J031v15n02_02.
4. Joshi K, Kumar R, Avasthi A. Morbidity profile and its relationship with disability and psychological distress among elderly people in Northern India. *Int J Epidemiol*. 2003; 32(6): 978–987p. doi: 10.1093/ije/dyg204. PMID: 14681260.
5. Arora VK, Bedi RS. Geriatric Tuberculosis in Himachal Pradesh: A Clinical Radiological Profile. *J Assoc Physicians India*. 1989; 37(3):205–207p.
6. Hassan SK. A Study of Morbidity Pattern among Geriatric Population in Fayoum Governorate, Egypt. *J Am Sci*. 2015; 11(4): 90–95p.
7. Swami, H.M, Bhatia, V, Dutt, R, Bhatia SPS. A Community Based Study of the Morbidity Profile among the Elderly in Chandigarh, India, *Bahrain Medical Bulletin*, 2002; 24. Available online at: https://www.bahrainmedicalbulletin.com/march_2002/Community.pdf
8. Tripathy JP. Geriatric care in India: A long way to go. *J Midlife Health*. 2014; 5(4): 205–206p. doi: 10.4103/0976-7800.145176.
9. Beck JC, Butler RN. Physician recruitment into geriatrics—further insight into the black box. *J Am Geriatr Soc*. 2004; 52(11): 1959–1961p. doi: 10.1111/j.1532-5415.2004.52528.x.
10. Gangadharan KR. Geriatric hospitals in India, today and in the future. *J Aging Soc Policy*. 2003; 15(2–3): 143–58p. doi: 10.1300/J031v15n02_09. PMID: 14696694.