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Long-term care homes and the Baby Boomers: *Future expectations and strategies*

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The Baby Boomer generation is getting older. In fact, all of Canada is aging. And though we are for the most part aware of our aging population, it remains important to elucidate just how that affects our families and day-to-day lives.

A new survey from the Institute of Marriage and Family takes a look at how the growing aging population will affect long-term care homes, the places which provide around-the-clock care to those who need it.

We surveyed 25 long-term care homes in Ottawa to determine what changes they anticipated with the arrival of the Baby Boomers in their facilities. The results of this qualitative survey showed four common concerns:

Higher expectations from Baby Boomers for care

Very simply, long-term care homes expect Baby Boomers to demand a higher level of care than they currently provide. This will result in more intense caregiving roles for staff as well as the need for more staff.

One residence wrote: "Another small issue we have encountered is that the new generation prefers showers every day, but there isn't usually enough staff to fulfill this desire. The Ministry of Health [and Long-Term Care Ontario] requirement is that residents are given two baths or showers every week."

Another wrote that arrival of Baby Boomers at their facility would require "(increased) income to support private accommodation," since many Baby Boomers are less willing than previous generations to share accommodations.

More diverse care needs

Residents are arriving in long-term care homes later in life and bringing with them complex diagnoses. One respondent wrote that "Dementia care demands immediate action to manage behaviours of residents and family members," which is inherently staff and time-intensive. Another wrote that they "must change staffing ratios to reflect complex diagnoses."

Staffing requirements

Given higher demands of care and more diverse care needs, staffing requirements also come to the fore. One facility described long-term care nursing as a "demanding job with an older workforce. Their bodies don't recover as fast, so they may get tired faster and possibly call in sick."

Another wrote that keeping staff was already difficult because "hospitals hospitals have more funding (so) they pay Registered Practical Nurses and Registered Nurses better" than long-term facilities can afford to.

Staffing levels are both an immediate and future concern for long-term care homes in Ottawa.

Funding levels

Long-term care homes quite consistently spoke of the challenges of providing quality care within the funding guidelines of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (Ontario). At the same time, the Ministry reports that its annual operating expenses are expected to be over \$39.5 billion for the year 2008-2009, compared to \$26.7 billion in 2007-2008.[1]

Given the current economic situation as well as the reality of a growing senior population in Canada, such spending levels are not sustainable in the future. More funding is not the answer to the problem of more long-term care residents because ongoing increases in funding are simply not possible.

Discussion and recommendations

What then, is a solution? Clearly, more nurses and senior care specialists will be needed in the future. Schools will need to make more room in those programs; more students will need to follow a career path into elder care.

Just as important, families need to stay involved in the lives the elderly. Whether your loved one lives in a retirement facility or independently, regular contact is mutually beneficial. Long-term care facilities surveyed all made room for family

involvement in the care of their residents; training is provided for more specialized care where necessary.

Recommendations include the following:

- Individuals and their families need to consider their local homecare options and other care alternatives before exploring entry into long-term care.
- Families, wherever possible, should continue to be actively involved of senior loved ones; regular visits, social outings and other activities can contribute to a more positive experience of personal health for seniors in retirement facilities.
- Families who live a distance away from parents or grandparents should consider encouraging their children to “adopt” a grandparent in a local long-term care facility.
- Elementary schools could be encouraged to engage in regular interaction with local seniors’ centres for the benefit of intergenerational socializing and learning.
- Colleges and universities should enlarge their R.N. and R.P.N. course openings to allow for more nurses in specialties applicable to eldercare such as foot care, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, orthopedics, speech therapy, dietary care and palliative care, among others.
- Nursing students should be encouraged wherever possible to specialize in geriatrics for a long and secure nursing career.

The full report: *Getting ready for the boom: Ottawa long-term care homes and the arrival of the Baby Boomers* is available online, [here](#).

Endnotes

[1] Ontario Ministry of Finance. (2008). Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, The Estimates, Summary. Retrieved September 22, 2009 from <http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/english/budget/estimates/2008-09/volume1/mohltc.html>