

GERIATRIC MEDICINE: WHERE IT IS?

The predicament of sick elderly people was disgraceful a few decades ago in the west. The ill older people were left to languish bedridden in the doleful environment. Then the era of Geriatric Medicine came in the 1950s to take care of the senior citizens of human society with respect to their health needs. Britain pioneered the geriatric medicine development and built exemplary care centres for their older population. They produced consultants and other care givers in geriatric medicine. Timely response to this crisis has enhanced the health care of the elder population and as a result, the morbidity and mortality has declined significantly in the recent years.

Geriatric population is growing at an alarming rate. Presently 380 million people are above age 65 and by 2020 more than 690 million will be above this age. Majority of these elder people usually suffer from more than one chronic disease like hypertension, diabetes, cardiac diseases, respiratory disorders etc. Unfortunately and unlike developed countries, our health care system is very fragile and lacks the policy for the elder people; as a result they are neglected and undertreated. Out of 190 million population of Pakistan, 9% consists of elder people. There are very little to almost no services and no programs of Geriatrics in Pakistan. Elderly are admitted to the same wards like the younger patients as geriatric wards are lacking in almost every hospital of Pakistan. There are no dedicated funds, discounts or allowances for the elder population. The elder people are often discharged prematurely either due to lack of finances or lack of beds to the incoming emergency admissions. The nonexistence of trained staff in geriatric medicine is posing a major challenge as well.

This is an alarming situation for the existing health care system in an era where we talk about building state of the art institutions. Building a multidimensional

approach that can take care of social, emotional, physical, psychological, financial and medical needs of the elder population is the need of the day. Geriatric wards should be started in all hospitals and doctors and nursing staff should be trained in this field. It is high time for the government and health ministry to plan and implement cost effective health care strategy for this helpless, sidelined, stranded and abandoned population.

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