

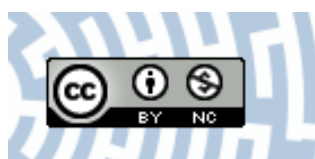


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Concern for worthy old age

Abstract

Social changes permanently occurring in modern world have been inevitably reflected in the decreased role of the family with regard to care for their elderly relatives. Notwithstanding the fact that the elderly do take more and more efforts to live on their own and independently of their children, there is always some point when the assistance of others becomes indispensable.

If the caring role of the family is disrupted to such an extent that the elderly person cannot count on any assistance from the family or has no relatives, then care in institutional settings can be a solution.

Nowadays, we can see the excessively growing number of applications for places in residential nursing homes.

A residential nursing home is a place that should provide the elderly with accommodation services, protection, physical rehabilitation, as well as social and mental activity recuperation. Moreover, elderly residents of institutional care homes should have the opportunity to cherish the human rights and basic freedoms, such as: respect for their dignity, privacy, beliefs and needs.

In our country there has not been active social policy with regard to the elderly yet that would entail comprehensive satisfaction of needs. One can have the impression that the role and place of the elderly is distinctly diminished.

We shall hope that the words cited from the Report of the Royal Commission on Long-Term Care, ordered and published in 1999 by the government of the United Kingdom, become significant also for the Polish circumstances:

(...) *The moral test of Government is how that Government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life - the sick, the needy, and the handicapped (...)*.

Key words: nursing home, social isolation, group psychotherapy, individual therapy

At present we can observe an increasing number of applications for placement in nursing homes.

The reasons for moving elderly people to nursing homes have different aspects. Undoubtedly, bad health condition is crucial, as well as loneliness as far as marital status, lack of family and loosened family ties are concerned.

In the last years factors of economic nature are becoming more and more important. Many seniors, not only due to their difficult financial situation but also because of bad social and economic conditions of people legally obliged to care about the elderly, decide to move and stay in nursing homes. A stay in such a place many a time is regarded as a social asylum.

Nursing homes, according to the Dispositions of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 15 September 2000 on nursing homes (published in the Official Journal of 4 October 2000), should provide the following:

- 1) basic living conditions:
 - m) accommodation
 - n) catering
 - o) clothes and footwear
- d) maintenance of cleanness
- 2) caring services such as:
 - a) assistance in basic vital functions
 - b) nursing
- c) necessary help with handling personal matters
- 3) assisting services such as (Clause 3 subclause f, g and clause 4 do not refer to elderly people):
 - a) enabling elderly people to participate in group occupational therapy
 - b) encouraging nursing home residents to keep fit and be active
 - c) satisfying the residents' religious and cultural needs
 - d) assuring conditions for the residents' self-government establishment
 - e) stimulating the start-up, preservation and development of contacts with family and neighbours
 - f) actions aiming at making a nursing home resident self-dependent as far as possible
 - g) help, especially therapeutic one, for a resident getting self-dependent to find a job
- h) assuring safe keeping of money and valuables
 - i) as far as possible, covering expenses of necessary personal belongings for a nursing home resident, who has no income, not exceeding 30% of regular social benefit referred to in art. 27 par. 5 of the act (Act of 29 November 1990 on social welfare)

- j) assuring the observance of nursing home residents' rights and making the information on such rights available to them
- k) efficient handling of residents' claims and petitions,
- 4) educational needs concerning children:
 - a) learning at school
 - b) participation in revalidation classes
 - c) learning and bringing up through life experience.

The scope and type of services, referred to in clause 4, are provided by the regulations of the Dispositions of the Minister of Education of 30 January 1997 on principles of organization of revalidation and educational classes for severely handicapped children and young people (published in the Official Journal No. 14, item 76).

Moving to a nursing home is always a strong emotional experience even for those who have made such a decision themselves.

In many respects it is an extreme situation, which induces a new attitude towards the world, towards oneself and one's own old age.

The time of adaptation to new conditions is very long. Not many people assume a constructive attitude, which consists in the acceptance of one's own situation, awareness of the presence of other people in a similar situation, willingness to be productive and enjoy some life values still available.

More often negative attitudes of elderly people towards other people and their own situation are observed.

Lack of interpersonal contacts, isolation, emotional coldness, loss of trust in other people, aggression, lack of interests and activity, sorrow susceptibility and melancholy, depression and fatalism are typical symptoms characterizing new residents of nursing homes.

Up till the present day in our society there has been an opinion that nursing homes are "shelters", "social isolation", no wonder that the residents feel ashamed or inferior due to their current situation. As a rule, residents feel lonely, unnecessary and those who have a family feel rejected.

They think that for the reasons unknown to them, they have been cruelly punished by fate. Then there follows a belief that one's own life is worthless. For many people the antidote for overcoming the feeling of shame and inferiority and the feeling of loneliness is pharmacological medication and alcohol.

The situation is additionally difficult and complicated when an individual had alcohol problems before moving to a nursing home. Usually changes in the psyche and particular habits have already been developed in those people.

In the talks which I had with nursing home staff it appeared that a high percentage of nursing home residents abusing alcohol are aggressive and vulgar people. They are frequently a threat for other residents.

Here is one of the comments:

" ... I came to this conclusion during the New Year's Eve ball when a drunken resident called me names. Another time I was hit hard on my breastbone with a fist by a drunken resident because I had pointed out to him that he should tidy up his things!"

(A worker of the Nursing Home in Cieszyn)

In such circumstances it is essential to work out a programme of individual care, in which mental and physical rehabilitation as well as a change of a resident's behaviour and development of his or her skills and interests should be introduced.

Also counselling as help with solving problems should be an important aim of the programme.

A special role should be assigned to a group therapy. Undoubtedly, group occupational classes enable residents to function more efficiently, deal with individual or group problems more constructively, they also help to find a way for more reasonable leisure activities. They are a form of therapy which prevents untimely old age.

A group is some kind of social and mental support. In the atmosphere of friendliness and sincere interest of many people it is certainly easier to talk about one's worries, and reduce an unpleasant emotional condition. In such a situation a therapy of mixing with others, a smile, gentle touch, a friendly impulse is more important than counselling.

A strong need for contact with other person and willingness to be productive are characteristic of elderly people.

Hence, the basic task for nursing homes should be to create such an atmosphere so that everyone could find their place there.

Active free time management seems to be the best alternative to resignation and indifference. That is why occupational therapy classes should be available to residents of nursing homes to give them a chance to express themselves in an available and individualized form. They make it possible to take advantage of life experience and skills, they stimulate intellectually and train memory.

Therapeutic rehabilitation, book and music therapies in a wide sense of the word should be also included in a therapeutic programme.

Meetings with representatives of a local society, folk artists, etc. are a desirable form of free time management.

It is advisable for each nursing home to cooperate with a school, nursery school or children's home. Schoolchildren could organize occasional events, social evenings and performances and help to keep annals, and albums, and record elderly people's memories. On the other hand, contact with little

children, the awareness of being a granny, even a substitute granny, opens new identity prospects, gives a feeling of continuity with future generations.

Going to the theatre and museums, tourist trips are also recommended.

A qualified team of specialists such as physiotherapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, occupational therapists and social assistants should provide old people with cheerful autumn of their life.

Only specialists with wide knowledge of gerontology are able to efficiently solve problems of elderly people, organize help and support for them so that no resident of a nursery home has to soothe their pain of loneliness abusing alcohol.

Work with elderly people is very difficult. Sometimes even discouraging in consideration of their ambivalent behaviour but sincere gratitude of a person, who may not have had many reasons to be happy in the past, is often a reward. That is why let us be understanding and patient.

In our country we rarely take up the issue of ageing. Do not let us protect our children from this issue as it depends on us what care we can expect in the autumn of our life.

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Act of 29 November 1990 on social welfare (published in the Official Journal of 1998, No. 64, item 414, text: last revision Official Journal of 2003, No. 203, item 1966)