

HUNGARY AS AN AGING SOCIETY

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SUMMARY

The authors describe the situation of the aged in Hungary, with a particular focus on the medical and ethical problems that health professionals have to face. The so-called post-communist transitional period is characterised by both economic and moral crisis. The country has a serious foreign debt problem as well as high rate of unemployment and crime, a considerable price inflation, and the pauperisation of the people, particularly among the old. The old are defined as those who have reached retirement age, which is 55 for women and 60 for men.

Hungary lacks the kind of incentives that would provide good reasons to live much beyond the age of 60. There is neither a suitable culture for old age nor economic security, and this seriously undermines the independence and autonomy of the old. Neither family nor institutional care for the elderly is adequate. Although over 20 per cent of the population are retired, they are not organized as a political power that would effectively represent them. The health care system is in crisis and the elderly suffer the most because of it. Therapeutic nihilism and both over-treatment and under-treatment of the aged is common. Among the old, the suicide rate is high. Because of a lack of funds, an inadequate number of experts, indifference to rehabilitation, and the infrequent use of technological interventions, home and institutional care are inadequate. There are no public debates on setting priorities or allocating limited resources. There are, however, high hopes for the success of a market economy, privatization, and well-functioning democracy.

Hopes, however, are not enough to cope with the problems created by the great demographic changes in the country. In order to solve the problems, great efforts are required. They should include the reform of health education, good health policies based on consensus, and a much greater emphasis on disease prevention.

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