
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION LAUNCHES NEW INITIATIVE TO ADDRESS THE HEALTH NEEDS OF A RAPIDLY AGEING POPULATION

Geneva – More than one billion people will be over 60 years old by 2025 and, as populations age, the burden of chronic diseases will increase. To help tackle the public health implications of ageing, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched Towards Age-Friendly Primary Health Care, new general principles that will serve as guidelines for community-based Primary Health Care (PHC) centres.

Released during the International Federation on Ageing's Seventh Global Conference on Ageing in Singapore, the principles are based on qualitative research in five countries, both developing and developed, and address three critical areas where more leadership, training and better information are needed if the PHC centres are to meet the challenge of older people's needs. These are:

- Information, education, communication and training for PHC providers,
- PHC management systems,
- The physical environment of PHC centres.

Today, there are 600 million people in the world aged 60 years and over. This figure is expected to double by 2025 and to reach 2 billion by 2050, the vast majority in the developing world. Population ageing is characteristically accompanied by an increase in the burden of chronic noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and other ageing-associated mental health conditions, cancers, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and musculo-skeletal problems. As a consequence, pressure on health systems worldwide will increase.

Early detection, appropriate intervention, management and follow-up of chronic conditions take place mainly at the PHC level. Older people already account for a sizeable proportion of PHC centre patients and as populations age and chronic disease rates climb, that proportion is expected to increase. PHC centres are ideally positioned to provide the regular and extended contacts and on-going care that older persons need at community-based level.

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Opportunities missed by health systems to deal with or manage age-related chronic NCDs will lead to increases in the incidence, prevalence and complications of these diseases and may take resources away from other priorities, such as child and maternal health. "An age-friendly health care centre does not favour older people, but instead benefits all patients, in line with the slogan of the United Nations to create 'A Society for All Ages'," says Dr Alexandre Kalache, who coordinates WHO's activities on ageing.

In the first instance, the Age-Friendly Principles will serve as a tool for awareness- raising among older people and their health care practitioners. A second step will include the testing of a tool-kit with information and training materials to support the implementation of the Age-Friendly Principles. The project is expected to culminate with the establishment of minimum standards to determine the age-friendliness of PHC centres. The

Age-Friendly Principles project was initiated in 2001 with the support of the Australian Government and, more recently the Merck Institute on Ageing and Health.

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