

Service availability and readiness for elderly healthcare

MEDIAN age of the population of Sri Lanka is increasing because of declines in fertility and mortality rates. The growing number of older adults increases demands on the public health system and on medical and social services. Chronic diseases, which affect older adults disproportionately, contribute to disability, diminished quality of life, and increased health and long-term care costs.

Increased life expectancy reflects, in part, the success of public health interventions, but public health programs must now respond to the challenges created by this achievement, including the growing burden of chronic illnesses, injuries, disabilities, psychological disorders and increasing concerns about future caregiving and healthcare costs.

Geriatrics, or geriatric medical care, is a specialty that focuses on healthcare of elderly people. It aims to promote health by preventing and treating diseases and disabilities in older adults. As people age, their physical health becomes fragile. Their psychological health too becomes increasingly at risk because of the impact of negative life events such as accumulated traumatic experiences, and poor social and economic factors. Healthcare of the elderly needs to therefore be responsive to these conditions to provide an elderly-friendly service. However, up to now there has hardly been any information on geriatric facilities available in the public and private health institutions.

It is timely that the Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medicine and the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) in collaboration has conducted a survey

Growing elderly population

The elderly population in Sri Lanka has grown rapidly in the past several decades. They were an unprecedented 2.5 million in 2012, and this is still increasing. One in eight Sri Lankans is 60 years or over. According to unpublished data, by the year 2017, elderly population has reached the level of 38%. This is in contrast to about a sparse one in 20 persons a few decades ago. Demographers project that the aged will double by 2051. Every fourth person in the country will then be an elderly. The numerical growth of the elderly has been happening almost invisibly and insidiously. Sri Lanka has progressed through a demographic transition of declining mortality and fertility rates. Starting mid 1940s, the death rate declined from 18.6 to 4.4 per thousand. Subsequently, the fertility rate or the average number of children born in a woman also began a downward trend declining from 5.5 to 2.4. Declining mortality is reflected in the steadily rising life expectancy at birth.

There are certain health conditions that are expected to be a challenge to our healthcare system with the increasing ageing population. These conditions include chronic illnesses such as cancer, obesity, diabetes, and psychological disorders such as dementia and Alzheimer's. The elderly are also increasingly likely to suffer from accidental falls.

Health status of the elderly population

The changing age structure has many and serious implications in almost all aspects of life. The disease profile has already changed from a predominance

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and the sanitation facilities were available in approximately 91% of public health facilities and all private hospitals (100%). Emergency transport service was available in a great majority of public hospitals (91% to 100%). Availability of basic equipment was high in all facilities especially those with in-ward facilities. Most individual tester items required for standard precautions were available in more than 80% of health facilities. The percentage of facilities offering primary laboratory tests was high for blood glucose test using glucometer.

However, there was a wide variation in the availability across different types of facilities. Availability of advanced laboratory tests such as liver and renal function tests was low among all health facilities. However, lipid profile testing was available in a large percentage of tertiary care hospitals and private hospitals with more than 50 beds, but low in other facilities. Availability of radiological tests (X ray) was high, and found in most tertiary care hospitals (85%), secondary care hospitals (39%), and private hospitals with more than 50 beds (89%).

Service readiness index

According to the report SARA - 2017, the general service readiness index is a composite measure designed to combine information from five domains namely, basic amenities, basic equipment, standard precautions, laboratory diagnostics, and essential medicines. The results revealed that general service readiness index score for hospitals in Sri Lanka was 29 out of 100, with a score of 77 out of 100 in public sector health facilities and 83 out of 100 in private sector health facilities.

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Elderly people have a need for more health monitoring and treatment than

Guest Column



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