

Care for the elderly

Geriatric care must be made part of the primary healthcare services in view of the rise in elderly population



Published: 14th Jan 2021 12:16 am

In a country that takes pride in celebrating strong family values, the plight of the elderly population largely goes unnoticed and unattended. One in two people above 60 years of age in India suffer from some chronic disease and many of them require professional help to carry on with their normal daily activities. The results of the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI), the world's largest study on the elderly, highlight the need for policy interventions and creation of specialised facilities to reduce the disease burden on the elderly population. The study, commissioned by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, tracked the ageing patterns and diseases affecting India's 103 million people over 60 years of age. It was found that about 40% of them have some form of disability, and as high as 20% are suffering from mental health issues. Also, 27% of this population group has multi-morbidities, which translates to roughly 35 million people. Nearly 24% of the elderly have difficulty in performing daily functions. Even if it is assumed that 90% of these people are taken care of at their respective homes by their near and dear ones, there is still 10% that would require professional help. There is a huge potential for employment generation in the area of geriatric care. Specialised training is required to take care of the elderly. The emergence of nuclear families, particularly in urban areas, has led to the collapse of support systems for the aged while lack of financial independence further exacerbates their plight.

India is in the midst of demographic transition with people above 60, who constituted 9% of the total population in 2011, are expected to account for 20% of the population in 2050. The LASI findings highlight the fact that India needs to make substantial investments, both in terms of finances and human resources, in geriatric care. It acquires urgency in view of the steady weakening of traditional support systems over the decades and the rise of nuclear families. At present, most of the medical colleges don't have specialised training wings in geriatrics. This gap needs to be addressed immediately. The geriatric care is now confined to some tertiary hospitals in urban areas and is prohibitively expensive. The Centre's National Programme for the Health Care of Elderly in 2011 promises preventive, curative and rehabilitative care, specialised training of health professionals, and aims to ensure full participation of the elderly in society. To meet this objective, geriatric health care services must be made part of the primary healthcare services. The elderly population in India grapples with not just their personal health issues but also the biases and intolerance of the younger generation.