

Aging and the impact on healthcare systems: The growing role of geriatric specialists.

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Introduction

As the global population continues to age, healthcare systems around the world are facing unprecedented challenges. The demographic shift towards an older population has significant implications for the delivery of healthcare services, making the role of geriatric specialists increasingly vital. In this article, we will explore the impact of aging on healthcare systems and discuss the growing importance of geriatric specialists in addressing the unique healthcare needs of older adults [1].

The demographic shift

The world is undergoing a profound demographic transformation. People are living longer, thanks to advancements in medical science and improved living conditions. While this is undoubtedly a cause for celebration, it also presents a series of challenges that healthcare systems must navigate. The United Nations predicts that by 2050, the global population aged 60 and over will reach 2.1 billion, more than doubling from 962 million in 2017 [2]. This shift is driven by declining birth rates and increased life expectancy. As a result, a higher percentage of the population will be in the age group most vulnerable to chronic diseases and age-related conditions.

Unique healthcare needs of older adults

Aging is associated with a higher risk of chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and osteoarthritis. Furthermore, older adults are more susceptible to cognitive decline, frailty, and a range of mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. These complex healthcare needs require a specialized approach that takes into account not just the physical ailments but also the psychological and social aspects of aging [3]. Geriatric medicine is a specialized field of healthcare that focuses on addressing the unique needs of older adults. Geriatric specialists, often referred to as geriatricians, are healthcare professionals who have received additional training and education in the care of older adults [4]. They are equipped to diagnose, treat, and manage a wide range of medical conditions common in this population, all while considering the individual's overall well-being.

The growing role of geriatric specialists

The role of geriatric specialists is becoming increasingly

critical in the face of an aging population. Here are several key areas where geriatric specialists are making a difference:

Comprehensive assessment: Geriatricians are trained to conduct comprehensive assessments that go beyond the standard medical examination. They consider a patient's functional status, cognitive function, social support, and quality of life. This holistic approach helps identify underlying issues that may not be apparent during a routine medical checkup.

Medication management: Older adults often take multiple medications to manage their various health conditions, increasing the risk of adverse drug interactions [5]. Geriatric specialists are skilled in medication management, ensuring that prescriptions are appropriate, safe, and effective for their elderly patients.

Fall prevention: Falls are a significant concern for older adults and can lead to severe injuries. Geriatric specialists assess a patient's risk of falling and develop strategies to reduce this risk, such as recommending home modifications and exercise programs.

Dementia and cognitive disorders: Cognitive decline, including conditions like Alzheimer's disease, is a prevalent concern in older populations. Geriatric specialists can diagnose and manage these conditions, providing support and guidance to both patients and their families.

Palliative and end-of-life care: As individuals age, they may face complex decisions about their healthcare preferences, including end-of-life care. Geriatric specialists are trained to facilitate discussions about advance care planning and provide palliative care to enhance the quality of life for older adults with serious illnesses.

Multidisciplinary care: Geriatric care often requires a multidisciplinary approach involving various healthcare professionals, including nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and social workers. Geriatricians are skilled in coordinating care teams to ensure that all aspects of a patient's health are addressed.

The role of geriatric specialists in healthcare systems

To fully appreciate the importance of geriatric specialists in healthcare systems, it's essential to understand their role in the context of the broader healthcare landscape.

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Geriatricians are trained to manage chronic conditions effectively, potentially reducing hospital admissions. By providing comprehensive care and early intervention, they can help older adults maintain their health and independence.

The goal of geriatric care is not just to extend life but to enhance its quality. Geriatric specialists focus on maintaining functional independence, managing symptoms, and addressing psychological and social aspects of aging.

While the initial investment in geriatric specialists may appear substantial, their expertise can lead to cost savings in the long run. By preventing hospitalizations and unnecessary treatments, geriatric care can be cost-effective.

Caring for an older adult can be emotionally and physically taxing. Geriatric specialists offer support and resources for caregivers, helping them better navigate the challenges of caregiving.

Geriatric specialists contribute to research in aging and geriatric medicine, driving innovations in care and treatment options for older adults. This research benefits not only the elderly but also the broader healthcare community.

Challenges and barriers

While the role of geriatric specialists is crucial, several challenges and barriers must be addressed to ensure that their expertise is accessible to those who need it.

Shortage of geriatric specialists: There is a shortage of geriatric specialists in many regions, making it challenging for older adults to access specialized care. Efforts are needed to increase the number of healthcare professionals choosing geriatrics as their specialty.

Aging workforce: Geriatric specialists themselves are not immune to the effects of aging. As these specialists retire, there is a risk of losing their expertise, highlighting the need for succession planning and continued training.

Healthcare system integration: Integrating geriatric specialists into healthcare systems can be challenging. Streamlining communication and collaboration among different healthcare providers is essential to ensure seamless care for older adults.

Access to care: Many older adults face barriers to accessing healthcare, including limited mobility, transportation issues,

and financial constraints. Healthcare systems must address these barriers to ensure equitable care for all.

Cultural competency: Geriatric specialists must also be culturally competent to provide care that respects the diverse backgrounds and preferences of older adults. This requires ongoing education and training.

Conclusion

The aging of the global population is a transformative demographic shift that poses both challenges and opportunities for healthcare systems. To address the unique healthcare needs of older adults, the role of geriatric specialists is becoming increasingly vital. These healthcare professionals are trained to provide comprehensive, patient-centered care that considers not only the physical but also the emotional and social aspects of aging. As healthcare systems continue to evolve to meet the demands of an aging population, it is essential to invest in the training and recruitment of geriatric specialists. By doing so, we can ensure that older adults receive the high-quality, specialized care they deserve, ultimately improving their quality of life and reducing the burden on healthcare systems. The field of geriatric medicine is not just about extending life; it's about enhancing the years lived with dignity and purpose.

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