

Advocating for the Elderly Adult

by Cindy Shemansky

If I asked you what area of health care you would like to specialize in, I would hear a myriad of answers, including the OR, ICU, ER, surgery, and maternity, just to name a few. No matter what health care setting you choose, you will be a gerontological nurse, as the primary recipient of services across all health care settings is the older adult. Even if you choose pediatrics or maternity as your specialty, be prepared to work with the elderly, as the caregiver of the infant or child may be a grandparent.

We use the term “aging population” constantly, and with good reason. The face of America is rapidly changing. Over the next 30 years, the number of older adults will grow at an alarming rate, and this population will be more diverse than in the past. The baby boomers, (those born between 1946 and 1964) will start turning 65 in 2011, causing a dramatic shift in the population during 2011-2030. Projections indicate that the older population will represent 20% of the total population in the United States during this period. (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2004.)

Unfortunately, as adults age, they often become frail, experiencing chronic ailments such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes, in addition to physical, sensory, and mental disabilities. The most recent U.S. Census stated that “forty-two percent of the population 65 and over reported some type of long lasting condition or disability,” with physical disabilities being reported as the most prevalent, and the percent of disabilities increasing notably with age (US Census 2000). As a future licensed nurse, part of your responsibility will be to “serve as an advocate for older adults and their families” (ANA, 2001) and to deliver care in a manner that preserves and protects patient autonomy, dignity, and rights” (ANA, 2004).

You are more than just a caregiver focusing on skills and tasks. You are a confidante and protector who provides education, guidance, and support to the patient and the family. You will need to advocate for older adults, working on their behalf to ensure that their families are involved in making informed decisions regarding their care plans. Older adults are often frail and unable to speak up for themselves, all the more reason why you will need to be their voice. But how well do you listen?

Sometimes, we dismiss the voice of the older adult because they may seem confused, or unable to interact in away that we are accustomed to. But as a future nurse, you must comprehend that advocating for the older adult without truly understanding them isn't going to achieve quality care. We cannot advocate for choices for the patient based on prejudices or stereotypes. Rather, we need to listen to the older adult and their family to ascertain their values and beliefs.

Whether in the home, hospital, community, or long-term care settings, older adults require comprehensive care that focuses on the individual (ANA, 2001). In your practice, you will need to embrace the complexity of care for this population by understanding the issues, listening, providing them with informed treatment choices, and being attuned to their values.

The older adult is a major constituency in the health care arena, and all of us will eventually care for the aged. Nursing students need to be knowledgeable regarding the care of the older adult, and act as their advocates to ensure quality health care for this population. ©

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