

Summary

As the first members of Canada's baby boom generation turn 65, the official age of retirement, this study by gerontologist Neena Chappell provides a timely overview of the main health and social policy challenges presented by population aging in three areas: informal care, formal care, and prevention.

There is much argument and debate among experts as to whether Canada's existing public programs will be sustainable with the increases in the number of seniors and their higher-than-average use of health and social services. However, it is factors other than population aging, such as increased medical interventions, changes in expensive technologies and increases in overall service utilization, that are mainly driving costs in the health care system. While present and upcoming demographic challenges do not warrant alarmist reactions, governments need to plan well ahead to ensure there is appropriate and effective care for an aging Canadian society.

Chappell first looks at the evolving care needs, and shows that in the coming years, more seniors will depend on fewer individuals to provide the care they need. While it is true that elderly people are likely to suffer from chronic conditions, not every chronic condition will translate into a disability. It remains unclear whether baby boomers will have better or worse health or will live longer than those who are currently elderly, as the incidence of some diseases is declining while that of others is on the rise.

The author underscores that when health fails, however, support by unpaid family and friends is the mainstay of care. Women are more likely than men to be caregivers, and the caregivers might themselves be seniors. Caregivers commonly experience stress and burden, especially when caring for people with dementia. Currently the health care system acts as a safety valve when family care is unavailable or insufficient, and the only public support for informal caregivers is the provision of short-term respite to ensure the continuity of family care.

Developing policies that support the needs of informal caregivers is important. In addition, there is a need for formal long-term home care as lower fertility rates, increasing rates of divorce, remarriage and blended families may affect the provision of care by family members. The assumption that medical care is the most appropriate means to ensure the health of an aging population needs to be re-examined.

We need to establish a comprehensive home care system that links and partners with informal caregivers and community organizations to form a support network for informal caregivers and care recipients; one that is also integrated into the overall health care system. This would be cost-effective and is the most appropriate option for an aging society.