

Adding Life to Years

Mrs. Uma Handa, Professor, L. T. College of Nursing, Bombay, describes here the essentials of care of the aged relevant to nurses and also gives a Code of Ethics in this regard.

THE health status of elderly has assumed a role of major importance for the health care professions. The W.H.O. definition of health "that it is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity", may not be fully implemented for our ever-growing aged population.

This is because of the various social forces which have created a peculiar situation for the society and more so for the elderly. Some of these forces like industrialization, mobility of people to the bigger cities, gradual diminishing of multi-generation families, and cultural changes, etc., have diverted the attention of the society from the elderly. This has resulted in the neglect of their care.

A Continuum

One tends to forget that the physical health or physiological homeostasis is not an all-or-none phenomenon, rather it is a continuum from a high level of efficiency and function to inefficiency or dysfunction. As the ageing process occurs, the point on the continuum at which there is maximum function slowly drops lower. This phenomenon occurs in all the organs of the body and with great diversity amongst the individuals. It is the tendency to identify only the negative aspect of the ageing process and associate it with disease. Thus, it has become a myth that ageing and disease are the same, which are in fact basically two different things.

Accepting the fact that health is a function of physical, mental and social well being and is the basic human right, the goal of assisting our ever-growing elderly population to achieve the status of health is a laudable one. This goal has to be achieved keeping in mind 'Health for All by 2000' A.D., which includes the health of the elderly, though not specifically stated. Thus, the theme of W.H.O. for 1982, 'Add Life to Years' is to focus the attention of all the health professions for the care of the elderly, so that this segment of population can be helped to live happily. Because, it matters not, "how long we live", it does matter "how we live?" The goal should be directed towards achieving and maintaining the health of elderly at their highest level of independence, physically, emotionally and socially. This requires the concern of every one involved to have a preventive, promotive, curative and rehabilitative approach.

Nursing is an art and a science. It has a body of knowledge and skills which can be utilised fully in the care of the elderly at home, in an institution or in the hospital settings. Added to their knowledge are the personal attributes of the nurse, which put her in the key position to look after the welfare of the elderly. She is in a unique position to be gentle, loyal to patient and comfort thus helping to enhance the life of the elderly at every stage of health, sickness, disability and death. In the service of these people, she can serve as a real model to others and collaborate with the health team, so that the needs and problems of elderly are not ignored. These needs are of a physical, physiological and psycho-social nature, which are, in fact, the needs of all of us. But, these become problems when the elderly are not able to cope with them and need assistance to adapt to the ageing process.

Knowledge and Understanding

The nurse needs to have a knowledge and understanding of the ageing process and its impact on the individual. She needs to have a positive attitude and a clear vision of her own in order to plan and implement the care. She should remember that the elderly have contributed to the society during their productive years, and can still remain productive members of the society if allowed to do so. She should remember that they possess potentialities of physical, social, intellectual nature. She can identify their strengths, and make effective contribution to help them, use these potentialities to their fullest to retain their physical, emotional and social independence. A Nurse should give allowance for the individual difference and give attention to their physical, psycho-social, spiritual and intellectual needs.

The nurse has the opportunity of caring for the elderly in the community and hospital setting. In the community, she can involve the family members in the assessment and identification of their needs and problems and advise in the planning of their care. She can help them to implement the plan by teaching simple methods of care. Through her resourcefulness, she can involve the other health and social agencies to assist the family in the care of the elderly. Institutional care is not much favoured in our society and rightly so, because removing any one from their normal surrounding has an adverse effect on any person and more so on the elderly, who start feeling the sense of worthlessness and their fear of becoming a burden to others due to physical incapacity. A Nurse should encourage the family to look after them in the normal surroundings, so that they are not deprived of the love and social contact.

In the hospital, a nurse can help in alleviating their sufferings by giving planned care on the individual-need basis. Planning the care for elderly can be oppressive, complex and frustrating at times. The nurse can make their experience of hospitalization a valuable one by her human touch. She should be fully aware of her responsibility in meeting their needs. She should see that while giving care they are allowed to utilise their existing abilities to the maximum. This will help in preventing the devastating effect of many chronic illnesses. Involvement of the elderly patient in the planning of his care will give him a feeling of self-identity and usefulness and planning will be more objective.

Preventing Complications

"What you do not use you lose". She should remember this and this helps in preventing further complications. She should make allowances for their physical shortcomings and deficiencies and keep in mind that these people are slow and get fatigued easily. She should not force, rather assist, them when and wherever necessary without making them dependent.

A Nurse must provide for their comfort and safety, nutrition exercises and hygienic needs. An acceptance of their limitations is knowing and perceiving and this should be interwoven in the philosophy of nursing. Desire to be loved and needed enhances the well being. Their need for this must be recognised and as a nurse she should have an insight and conscience. Concern for their emotional and social requirements, the problem of loneliness, apathy, depression, etc. should be prevented. Despair and worthlessness should be replaced by contentment and peace. She can help them to maintain their self-esteem, dignity, self-identity and respect.

It is seen that there is a great deal of lack of empathy for the aged by the family members as well as the health personnel. Most of their obvious problems are dismissed by saying "nothing can be done, this is part of old age". In fact, we should show more concern and develop a realistic and optimistic approach to their problems, so that further complications are prevented and they do not become physically burdened and dependent.

Dependency of any type itself is a major problem, which should be avoided. Love, affection and concern are the vital factors in our life. This aids in coping with everyday's problem. It is a source of solace and comfort when we are sad. The elderly go through loss of love and loved ones. If they continue to experience such losses, their sense of being needed can be severely diminished. Meeting their emotional needs can be very challenging. The problem of senility, hostility, dissatisfaction may be manifested. Utmost skill and patience is required on the part of the nurse. She should never forget that these people require her continuous support, encouragement and nursing care.

Our nursing care should reflect positive attitude. The loyalty, confidence, dedication combined with knowledge, understanding and skill that we will reveal as a nurse in the care of the aged will go a long way to enhance the prestige and reputation of our profession. The nature of our job can be challenging and difficult, in the sense that we see a man at the end of his life, whose energies are spent and are at the lowest ebb, whose interests are waning and whose self-esteem has been reduced. In the light of the vastness of their problem, we as nurses will need to have sufficient resources of our own, so not to get disillusioned and be able to meet the challenge. We should be able to utilise all the resources at our disposal in the care of the aged at home or in the hospital.

Deep Quality of Love

I will now end up by quoting Charles D. Bonner: "All those who deal with aged must have the deep quality of love. It is through the vehicle of love that the ageing person will still feel that he has a right to a place on this earth. Give him these and optimism instead of despair and pessimism. Give him mental and physical activity instead of incarceration in an institution. Give him adequate preventive measure and progressive adequate treatment of existing disability instead of terminal care. Give him a continuous interest in life, instead of a bed and chair. Give him companionship instead of loneliness. Give him love and life instead of disinterest and death and the time will come when elderly will take their place in the sun."

1. Nurse should believe that "Age" and "Sickness" are not the same.
2. She must remember that the aged have the right to life, freedom and happiness.
3. She maintains and respects the dignity of an ageing person by knowing his individual needs and desires.
4. She must understand the ageing persons and have positive attitude towards them.
5. She must provide nursing care of the aged in safe, competent and pleasant manner.
6. She must remember that effective communication is essential in work with the aged.
7. She must involve the aged and the family in the planning and implementing of care to increase the prestige of both.
8. She should seek assistance from the other resources to help the elderly and his family.
9. She should have the philosophy of usefulness essential to a purpose for living.
10. She should remember that the aged do think of dying and death. She should provide an environment conducive to allowing them to discuss such thoughts.
11. She should respect confidences held to her in the performance of her duty.
12. She should participate in the establishment of better health services for the aged at national and state level.