

Well-being of the Elderly Population: a Multi-factorial Approach

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Introduction

Globally, people are living longer than ever before and the number of elderly people is increasing every year. Today, one of the challenges the world is facing is this unprecedented increase in the ageing population.¹ The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that the number of people aged 60 years and older will increase to 1.4 billion by 2030, from 1 billion in 2019, and will reach 2.1 billion by 2050.² The number of centenarians - people living for more than 100 years - in 2015 are estimated to double by 2030. This demographic shift is mainly because of increasing life expectancy, decreasing fertility, and the ageing of a large number of people.³

In the past, population ageing used to be an issue in affluent nations, but it is now becoming a serious concern in the low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs). It is estimated that LMICs will be home to 80% of the world's older population by 2050.^{4,5} Bhutan is not an exception. About 6.2% of the total Bhutanese population comprises elderly people and it is predicted that, in the next 40 years, the elderly population in the country will be more than double the number of the young population.⁶

Issues Faced by the Elderly Population

Ageing, a natural phenomenon, is a gradual decline in physical and mental capacity, leading to increased risk of disease(s), increased dependency and, finally, death.⁷ By the age of 60 years and above, a person will undergo many physiological changes in all organ systems, including the

¹ World Health Organisation. *Ageing and health*. 2022

² World Health Organisation. *Ageing*. 2023

³ Bloom, D.E., D. Canning, and A. Lubet, *Global Population Aging: Facts, Challenges, Solutions & Perspectives*. 2015

⁴ WHO. *Ageing and Health*. 2022

⁵ WHO. *Ageing*. 2023

⁶ United Nations. *Population Pyramid of Bhutan at 2023*.

⁷ WHO. *Ageing*. 2023

cardiovascular, respiratory, renal, gastrointestinal, endocrine, skin, nervous and musculoskeletal systems.⁸

Ageing also leads to a decline in the functions of special senses, such as vision, hearing, smell, touch and taste equity.⁹ The rate of cell degeneration in ageing exceeds the rate of regeneration.¹⁰ Thus, at this age, one is prone to several physical issues, such as hearing loss, cataracts and refractive errors, back and neck pain, osteoarthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, and other chronic illnesses.¹¹

Mental health is another crucial aspect of ageing, just as for any other age group. Very often, older people face special mental health challenges, as they are confronted with significant ongoing losses in capacities and decline in functional abilities.¹² Ageing is frequently accompanied by additional transitions, such as retirement, relocation, and increased reliance on others for various assistance, and the loss of friends, spouses, and relationships.¹³

Associated with reduced mobility, chronic pain, frailty or other physical health problems, older people are also more likely to experience grief and bereavement, or face financial issues, and these stressors can result in social isolation, loneliness, or psychological distress.¹⁴ Dementia and depression among older people are other significant public health issues in most countries.¹⁵

Population ageing also results in significant social and economic transformations, impacting nearly all sectors of society, including the demand for goods and services, health, housing, employment, transportation, and social protection, leading to low quality of life, limited financial health literacy, and social/health inequity which are additional threats to the holistic well-being of elderly people.^{16,17} Besides physical and mental health

⁸ Amarya, S., K. Singh, and M. Sabharwal, *Ageing Process and Physiological Changes*, in *Gerontology*. 2018

⁹ Singh, and Sabharwal, *Ageing Process and Physiological Changes*. 2018

¹⁰ Tripathi, K.M., et al., *Geriatric Nutrition: Need for Better Ageing*. 2016

¹¹ WHO. *Ageing*. 2023

¹² World Health Organisation. *Mental health of older adults*. 2023

¹³ WHO. *Ageing*. 2023

¹⁴ Aghakhani, N. and C.S.Y. Park, *Spiritual well-being promotion for older adults: Implication for healthcare policy makers' decision making on cost savings*. 2019

¹⁵ WHO. *Mental health of older adults*. 2023

¹⁶ Bloom, et al., *Global Population Aging*. 2015

¹⁷ Aghakhani and Park, *Spiritual well-being promotion for older adults*. 2019

changes, spiritual health sees significant changes as the person gets older.¹⁸ Existential and religious well-being becomes more meaningful to deal with adversity and the experience of illnesses and ageing.¹⁹

Everyone in general aspires to live longer. Globally, even in LMICs, despite various challenges that exist, most governments continue putting tremendous efforts in ensuring an increase in the life expectancy of their population. For example, the life expectancy of the Bhutanese people has more than doubled to 72 years in 2020, from 35 in the 1960s.²⁰ However, how well our elderly people live and how good their quality of life is may vary drastically.

Studies elsewhere have emphasised that with a global increase in the ageing population, which is only going to accelerate, governments and relevant organisations must consider changes in their institutional and social arrangements to ensure a better quality of life for their ageing population.²¹

How Can We Ensure Better Well-being Among Elderly Bhutanese?

Although challenging, ensuring good health and well-being of the elderly people is a vital responsibility for every country. Like in most neighbouring countries, it is a long-standing custom and tradition in Bhutan for children to take care of ageing parents. At least one child lives with the parents or vice versa. However, in today's materialistic and technologically driven world, this tradition is progressively becoming obsolete.

A huge number of Bhutanese youth is leaving the country today with an intention to study and live abroad for a longer period of time, due to reasons such as low salary and limited opportunities in the home country.^{22,23} If one sibling gets the opportunity, the others are likely to follow suit. Given the current rate at which Bhutanese youth are leaving the country, and the existing reality of limited old age care services in Bhutan, the well-being of our elderly population should be a serious national concern.

¹⁸ Lima, S., et al., *Spirituality and quality of life in older adults: a path analysis model* BMC Geriatrics. 2020

¹⁹ Lima, *Spirituality and quality of life in older adults*. 2020

²⁰ The World Bank. *Life expectancy at birth, total (years) - Bhutan*. 2021

²¹ Bloom, et al., *Global Population Aging*. 2015

²² Pelden, T., *More Bhutanese leaving the country and going abroad*, in *Business Bhutan*. 2022

²³ Namgay, T., 32,258 Bhutanese live overseas in 113 countries, in *Kuensel*. 2023

Therefore, having well-planned national strategies in place could ensure the well-being of our elderly people. Evidence in other countries have found that ensuring the happiness and well-being of the elderly people is multi-factorial.^{24,25} Factors such as ensuring the right nutrition, physical exercises, activities to stimulate their brain functions that will lead to behavioural changes and supportive physical and social environment are found to contribute to better well-being among the elderly population.^{26,27} However, the need for such factors will significantly vary among elderly people. Thus, it is essential to first carry out a comprehensive assessment, including that of the caregivers, whose needs, if addressed adequately, will enhance a better quality of life of their elderly loved one.²⁸ For example, the process of ageing affects nutritional needs and so the elderly people are often vulnerable to malnutrition. Careful nutritional assessment is necessary to avoid preventable complications at this age.²⁹

Butler and colleagues in their study, *New Lessons of Nurturing Life for Geriatric Patients*, have highlighted that more emphasis should be on non-pharmacological approaches, rather than drug-based therapies, and to aim for “balanced” ageing rather than “successful” ageing.³⁰ “Successful ageing” is the rigorous maintenance of physical and mental health of the elderly people so that they will be able to contribute to their community till the end of their lives.³¹ Unfortunately, only few achieve successful ageing. On the other hand, balanced ageing is ensuring contentment, irrespective of the functional decline, through alternate therapies rather than just pharmacological approach.³² Hennezel, in her book, *The Warmth of the Heart Prevents Your Body From Rusting – Ageing without growing old*, describes the art of growing old without fear and depression.³³

In Bhutan, thus far, a handful of national programmes is in place to emphasise appropriate elderly care in the society. In 2020, the Elderly Care Programme of the Ministry of Health released a Manual for Integrated

²⁴ Butler, J.P., M. Fujii, and H. Sasaki, *New Lessons of Nurturing Life for Geriatric Patients*. 2012

²⁵ Hossain, M.M., et al., *Geriatric Health in Bangladesh during COVID-19: Challenges and Recommendations*. 2020

²⁶ Butler, et al., *New Lessons of Nurturing Life for Geriatric Patients*. 2012

²⁷ Hossain, et al., *Geriatric Health in Bangladesh during COVID-19*. 2020

²⁸ Butler, et al., *New Lessons of Nurturing Life for Geriatric Patients*. 2012

²⁹ World Health Organisation, *Integrated Care for Older People*. 2021

³⁰ Butler, et al., *New Lessons of Nurturing Life for Geriatric Patients*. 2012

³¹ Rowe, J.W. and R.L. Kahn, *Successful aging*. 1997

³² Butler, et al., *New Lessons of Nurturing Life for Geriatric Patients*. 2012

³³ Hennezel, M.d., *The Warmth of the Heart Prevents Your Body From Rusting*. 2010

Community Based Screening for Elderly People in Bhutan.³⁴ The manual is a guideline on the screening services for various non-communicable diseases along with the assessment for mental health disorders in the elderly population. Additionally, the programme is in the process of finalising the national policy for senior citizens in collaboration with relevant agencies and the health strategy.

As of today, there are two old age homes in the country, one in Punakha for elderly monks and the other at Wangsisina, Thimphu, for homeless elderly people. There is also a handful of health professionals in the country specialised in geriatric care.

Moreover, programmes such as Service with Care and Compassion Initiative – a people-centred approach by the Ministry of Health - have helped the elderly population access healthcare services at the doorstep, especially for those living in remote communities.³⁵

Current initiatives like “priority seats” and “priority token numbers” in the hospitals across the country are respectful gestures towards our elderly citizens. Such noble approaches can be initiated elsewhere like in the transport services and other relevant facilities. Also in Bhutan, the month of October is observed as the month for older persons. Throughout the month, comprehensive screening for chronic illnesses is provided across the country, targeting more than 80% coverage in respective catchment areas.

In addition, our De-Suungs, Guardians of Peace, who reach out to render voluntary services in the community, could be trained in holistic geriatric care as a part of the ongoing De-Suung Skilling Project. Moreover, integrating religious approaches into the care package could enhance the quality of life of our elderly people. Buddhist wisdom, for instance, describes how to find relief from the suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death, the inevitable truths in life.

Evidence from other countries indicate that opportunities like behavioural changes in increasing rates of saving, investments in human capital to boost the number of productive working people, thereby countering the drop in

³⁴ Ministry of Health. *Manual for Integrated Community Based Screening for Elderly People in Bhutan*. 2020

³⁵ World Health Organisation, *World report on ageing and health*. 2015

the labour force caused by aging populations and falling fertility rates, have also made it possible for workforces to grow the involvement of women, and reform in health and education to cater to the needs of elderly people.³⁶

Such institutional reforms could help address the changing demographic realities in Bhutan.

Conclusion

Being a country that believes in Gross National Happiness, where the well-being of its people is prioritised above economic prosperity, working towards ensuring adequate happiness and well-being of our elderly people is not just vital but is considerably feasible as well. With socially, culturally, and spiritually appropriate policies in place, Bhutan can be an exemplar to the region and the world at large for ensuring optimal well-being of elderly people.

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³⁶ Bloom, etal., *Global Population Aging*. 2015

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