

CARE OF ELDERLY PARENTS: A GROWING CONCERN FOR NORTH DAKOTA FAMILIES

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The number of elderly citizens in North Dakota has increased at a faster rate than the state's total population. The state's population increased by 5.7 percent during the last decade, while the number of people 75 years and older increased by 22.2 percent (North Dakota State Health Plan, 1982-1985). Issues related to the care of the elderly population are critical for North Dakota farm families due to several factors unique to growing old in rural areas. These issues are explored in this article and the attitudes of 700 randomly selected North Dakota farm men and women toward care of their elderly parents are presented.

The Background

Our country's legal system has historically recognized the critical importance of the family to the well-being of its members and of society. Under the law of domestic relations, a high value is placed on the special relationships of family members. The most clear cut of these relationships are the legal duties of husband and wife to care for each other and of parents to care for their children by providing the necessities of life (Force and Baum, 1982). The law does not presently delineate responsibilities of adult children to provide care for their elderly parents. However, the extent of the family's economic responsibility for elderly members who receive Medicaid and are in nursing homes has been getting increased attention from policy makers. In fact, recent changes in Medicaid rules make it permissible for states to require such payments from relatives (Feldman, 1983).

Although most people over 65 years are physically able to care for themselves, it is well known that the incidence of illness and disability rises significantly with increasing age. Approximately 20 percent of all people

65 or older will be hospitalized during a one-year period with a much higher incidence for those over 75 years (Feldman, 1983). In general, elderly people face problems of financial demands along with loss of mobility, friends and possibly their home (Olson and McCubbin, 1983).

There are problems unique to growing old in rural areas. Elderly farm people often experience intense psychological distress when they move from their farm home because of their ties to their land. Rosenblatt (1983), in his research of grief among farm families, found it was common for farmers to "grieve for the home place" long after they had moved away.

Other problems that have been identified include a shortage of medical services, a lack of transportation and long distances to existing services (Osgood, 1979). Perhaps one of the most painful of all problems associated with growing old is the loss of independence. Rural values have emphasized self-reliance (Goodfellow, 1983). The frailty that accompanies aging will often demand that the elderly person accept help from his/her family. Many, however, will refuse assistance as long as they can possibly manage in order to maintain their independence.

A larger percentage of people 65 years and older reside in homes for the aged in North Dakota than in any other state. In North Dakota, 7.5 percent of the elderly are institutionalized compared with 4 percent nationwide. It is noteworthy that Arizona and Florida have 18 and 19 persons, respectively, per 1,000 elderly residents in homes for the aged, compared to North Dakota, which has 75 persons per 1,000 (State Health Plan, 1982-85). Perhaps North Dakota winters play a part in determining where the elderly residents will live.

Alternatives to institutional care are offered to North Dakota's elderly people. Specific services offered to help maintain the elderly in their homes include public health nurses, home health aides, home delivered meals and homemaker services. Unfortunately, however, these services do not reach many of our state's elderly farm residents. For these people, their families become a major source of support and assistance.

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The Study

The Sporakowski Attitudes Toward Care of Elderly Parents Scale (Sporakowski, 1972) was sent to 2,000 randomly selected North Dakota farm residents. Six hundred ninety-six questionnaires were returned and furnished the data for this study. There were 259 male and 437 female respondents. Their average age was 47 years.

The Sporakowski Attitude Scale consists of 20 statements regarding care of the elderly. The respondent indicates his/her agreement or disagreement with each statement. For purposes of scoring, responses are numerically coded. A total attitudinal score is derived by adding the individual statement scores.

Results

The percentage of subjects who agreed with each statement on the questionnaire is shown in Table 1.

The farm men and women in this study rejected the ideas that the government should require adult children

to help pay for nursing home care of parents receiving Medicaid. Only 20 percent agreed with this statement.

However, over half (54 percent) of the respondents agreed that children should take care of their elderly parents. A lower percentage (44 percent) thought that every child should be willing to share his/her home with aged parents.

The respondents were less favorable to having their elderly parents live with them if their presence in the child's home caused trouble, inconvenience or conflict to family life. Less than one-fourth (24 percent) agreed with the statement "Children should overlook the trouble that aged parents might cause in the home." Twenty-one percent agreed that children should put up with any inconvenience in their family life in order to help aged parents. No matter how crabby, critical or interfering the parents were, 11 percent of the respondents agreed that children should give them a home.

The farm men and women in this study appeared to be considerate of their spouses' and childrens' feelings

Table 1. Attitudes of Farm Men and Women Toward Care of Elderly Parents

	Percentage Agreeing		
	All Subjects	Men N = 259	Women N = 437
1. Aged parents should be taken care of by their children unless the spouses of the children object.	52%	56%	49%
2. Children should give a home to aged parents when ties between aged parent and their grandchildren are close.	52%	53%	52%
3. Children should provide a home for their aged parent even if conflict arises between the aged parent and their grandchildren.	19%	25%	15%
4. Aged parents should be taken care of by their children.	54%	58%	52%
5. Every child should be willing to share his home with his aged parents.	44%	48%	42%
6. Children should overlook the trouble that aged parents might cause in the home.	24%	34%	18%
7. Children should put up with any inconvenience in their family life in order to help aged parents.	21%	28%	17%
8. Children should give a home even to aged parents who interfere a lot in family affairs.	8%	11%	5%
9. No matter how crabby, critical, and interfering aged parents are, children should give them a home.	11%	15%	9%
10. Children should be willing to give a home to an aged parent who is an extremely jealous busy-body.	12%	17%	9%
11. Aged parents who keep getting in the way should not be given a home by their children.	42%	42%	42%
12. If aged parents are unpleasant, children should not give them a home.	47%	45%	48%
13. If aged parents are a nuisance in the home, children should refuse to take them in.	53%	47%	51%
14. Children should not give a home to aged parents who are quarrelsome.	61%	58%	63%
15. Aged parents who interfere with family affairs should be put out of your home.	56%	57%	56%
16. Children should not take care of aged parents if it makes for squabbling and turmoil all the time.	88%	79%	90%
17. Aged parents should be taken care of by their children regardless of the feelings of the spouses of the children.	11%	16%	8%
18. Aged parents should have a say in where they live.	94%	93%	95%
19. Aged parents should understand they have to stand on their own feet without help from children.	54%	54%	54%
20. The government should require adult children to help pay the nursing home bill for their parents on Medicaid.	20%	28%	15%

in decisions regarding care of their elderly parents. For instance, only 19 percent agreed that children should provide a home for their aged parents even if conflict arises between aged parent and grandchildren. A similar statement, aged parents should be taken care of by their children regardless of the feelings of the spouses of the children, drew only an 11 percent agreement.

In order to determine if the farm residents' attitudes toward care of their elderly parents differed according to their level of education, sex, age or annual income, a four-way analysis of variance procedure was used. There were no significant differences in attitudes according to education, income or age of respondent. Highly significant differences were found between the attitudes of men and women toward caring for their elderly parents ($F = 12.51$, $P = .004$). Men generally had more positive attitudes toward caring for their elderly parents than did the women in this study.

Differences between the responses of men and women on individual questions were explored using Chi-square analysis. Significant differences were found for eight of the 20 questionnaire statements.

More men than women agreed that: children should overlook the trouble that aged parents might cause in the home ($P = .001$); children should tolerate any family life inconvenience in order to help aged parents ($P = .007$); children should give a home to aged parents who interfere ($P = .003$); regardless of how critical and interfering aged parents are, children should give them a home ($P = .006$); aged parents should be taken care of by their children regardless of the feelings of the children ($P = .003$) and adult children should help pay the nursing home bill for their parents ($p = .001$). More women than men agreed that adult children should not take care of aged parents if it creates continued turmoil ($p = .003$).

Discussion and Conclusion

The farm men and women in this study generally indicated a commitment toward the care of their elderly parents. However, they did not appear to be willing to pay for their parents' nursing home care, nor were they willing to bring their parents into their homes if it would create family conflict.

The women in this study were less willing to assume responsibility for their care of elderly parents than were the men. A plausible explanation for this difference can be found in the research of Margaret Feldman, a noted

family scholar, in a speech at the 60th Annual Agricultural Outlook Conference. She stated that men are very concerned about their parents' welfare, but it is women who provide the actual physical care for the elderly parents. Thus, while men are most likely to provide economic counseling and some transportation, it is the women who frequently feel the stress and strain of added household labor.

Feldman proposed that rural women who care for the elderly family members need support services in the form of assistance with their workload and information about their own well-being. Additionally, we must realize that assuming responsibility for the care of elderly parents may be overwhelming for some families, depending on their existing obligations. For these, and others, a family's true maturity is being able to recognize the limits of one's endurance (Feldman, 1983; Eyde and Rich, 1983).

The importance of the family to the well-being of society cannot be over-emphasized. Scholars have regarded the family as one of the most critical factors in determining the direction of one's life. Therefore, a major consideration, regardless of the type of care given by the family, should be that the amount of stress created does not destroy positive family bonds that have taken years to develop.

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