

Editorial: The Caregiving Dilemma

Government social policy in Canada today is being shaped by an atmosphere of fiscal panic. The burden and responsibility for social and health services is being handled like a hot potato – tossed from the federal government down to the provinces who in turn have passed it down to the community and to families. The policy of most provinces is to shift the focus of care for the elderly to the community and to rely on families as the principle caregivers with some support from low paid home care workers. Family care is mostly care by wives and daughters and paid homemakers are usually women. The result is a care system in which the financial, emotional and physical responsibilities of care to the elderly continue to be shouldered by women.

The caregiving dilemma faced by policy-makers is how to provide quality services to seniors in an affordable manner without taking advantage of women. Unfortunately, most provinces have not yet found adequate solutions to this dilemma. An important first step is to acknowledge that there is a problem. Caregiving, both paid and unpaid, has very low status in Canada. This reflects a lack of value placed on the seniors requiring care and those providing it. There is an expectation that women will continue to provide free or low wage labour to care for seniors. A provincial official responsible for long-term care services, stated in an informal interview that families would have to continue to provide care for elderly relatives because there was not enough money to meet all their needs. Some home care programs prioritize services for those seniors without families and provide fewer supports to those seniors living with their families. The expectation is that the wife or daughter should provide any care that is needed.

The majority of paid care that is received by seniors is provided by low wage homemakers. These workers have low status in their respective organizations and have little opportunity to change the structure of the system. In many organizations homemakers are not included in care planning (although they usually have the most contact with the client) and are provided information about their client from the professionals involved in the service. Although most homemakers provide quality service they receive few opportunities to upgrade their skills or their qualifications. In fact the trend has been to deprofessionalize the provision of care to seniors in the community. Most of the professions which are being cut back are dominated by women.

In an article in this journal Sheila Neysmith and Barbara Nichols argue that policy-makers have focused on the tasks related to caregiving and not the working conditions of those providing the care. This functional approach to tasks allows policy that ignores both the recipient and provider of care. Neysmith and Nichols' analysis of the working conditions of family

caregivers, volunteers and paid homemakers clearly shows that there is more to caregiving than functional tasks. Their analysis reveals working conditions for unpaid family caregivers that include financial hardships, isolation, lack of feedback, lack of training, 24-hour responsibility and little or no time off. When family caregiving is viewed as a job with such poor working conditions it becomes difficult to justify current policies that trap women in these conditions. Neysmith and Nichols' analysis of the working conditions of paid workers shows that they are somewhat better off than unpaid family caregivers but still experience low pay, low status, few opportunities for advancement and low job flexibility. Volunteers appear to have the best working conditions and the highest status despite their lack of pay.

Government policies toward family caregivers are built around the premise that minimal supports will be sufficient to enable families to continue to provide care, but largely do not address the long-term impact that work conditions have on the caregivers. Neysmith and Nichols posit that government should acknowledge its obligation to seniors regardless of their family status by guaranteeing a core set of services. This would allow families to have increased choice over the care that they provide and ensure that all seniors have access to care. This is a sound recommendation that recognizes the commitment that society should have to care for the elderly. However, a core set of services would not be sufficient to solve the caregiving dilemma. New approaches to supporting and sharing responsibility with family caregivers as well as improving the status of home care workers are also needed.

Current policies are limited to providing respite and various support groups for family caregivers. Future initiatives should expand the range of supports to include workplace programs, family leave policies, tax compensation and various forms of financial reimbursement to families providing care. Training for caregivers on how to provide care, as well as job training for those who will want to reenter the workforce are important elements of a comprehensive support package. Caution must be exercised to ensure that these supports are not used to further exploit family caregivers. Some current programs to reimburse family caregivers only provide poverty level subsidies.

The job of homemaker or home support worker should be redesigned to provide the workers with more flexibility to adapt their service to meet the needs of their clients. Training should be more extensive and advanced job levels should be developed to provide opportunities for advancement. Most important in improving the status of these workers is the recognition that homemaking provides many social benefits to the client beyond housework. The goal should be to acknowledge that these individuals are an important part of the care team.

The caregiving dilemma goes beyond the constraints of the fiscal crisis in Canada. The core problem remains how we value seniors in society and the extent to which governments acknowledge their responsibility to provide appropriate care. Innovative approaches are required to use the money that is available to ensure that all seniors in Canada who require care are ade-

quately served. We cannot continue to make excuses or expect only women and families providing care in poor working conditions to fill the gaps.

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