

Geriatrics – an emerging field of medicine*

It is estimated that developing countries like India and China shall house one-third of the total elderly population, nearly one billion by 2050. At present, 30% of Japan's total population consists of the elderly, i.e. above 60 years of age. According to a recent report released by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), 64 countries will see a rise in the elderly population. The concept of 'aged economies' is also emerging fast. Therefore, there is a scope for research and improvement in the healthcare system for the elderly population.

Geriatrics is an emerging branch of medicine which addresses the needs of the elderly and emphasizes on providing a supportive treatment for comorbid chronic diseases. Recently, a two-day conference was organized to highlight advances in geriatric care. A mix of doctors, scientists, nurses and auxiliary health workers attended the 'geriatric summit'. The role of anti-ageing medicines and interventions was also discussed during the conference.

Numerous problems are associated with ageing and researchers worldwide are trying to address them. Several aspects of age-related problems like sleep disturbance, diseases, medical interventions, etc. were dealt with during the conference. M. V. Jali (Organising Chairman and President Elect, Geriatric Society of India) in his inaugural address spoke about the increasing number of elderly aged 80 years, primarily women. K. Satyanarayana (President, Geriatric Society of India) in his Presidential address pointed out the implications of

intra-cerebral haemorrhage, which accounts for 8–13% of all strokes, more likely to result in death or major disability than ischaemic stroke or subarachnoid haemorrhage, and was a result of a wide spectrum of disorders. The only medical therapy to deal with intracranial haemorrhage is principally focussed on adjunctive measures to minimize injury and to stabilize individuals in the perioperative phase. O. P. Sharma (Secretary, Geriatric Society of India) delivered the keynote address on health issues pertaining to old age and medical interventions for its management, including therapeutic or preventive measures.

Rajendra B. Nerli (Director, KLES Kidney Foundation, Belgaum) discussed urinary incontinence in the elderly, a problem that increases with age. Renu Wadhwa (National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, Japan) explained how a stress protein, mortalin, regulates old age and brain disorders. Allison Page (Deputy Director of Nursing, Birmingham, UK) delved into the management of geriatric condition while Thomas Helen (Freemantle Hospital and Rockingham General Hospital, Perth, Australia) highlighted the challenges of developing Geriatric Medical Service. He felt that there was a need to integrate the services across different healthcare settings in order to provide a seamless transition for patients. Zoe Wyrko (University Hospital, Birmingham, UK) spoke on medical aspects of comprehensive geriatric assessment.

Disturbed sleep or changes in sleep pattern is common among the elderly. G. M. Wali (Neurospecialities Centre, Belgaum) viewed these changes to be a part of the normal ageing process. But many a times the disturbance may be related to pathological processes, he said. In addition to affecting quality of life –

because of excessive daytime sleepiness, as well as physical, psychological and cognitive problems – sleep disorders have been implicated with increased mortality. The number of medications used tends to increase with age, which could also lead to increased morbidity, mortality and side effects such as falls, cognitive impairment, and even sleep disturbance. Uday Mutane (Neurologist, Bangalore) shared his experience in treating elderly patients afflicted with Parkinson's disease.

Vaccination is an important component of disease prevention in the elderly; however, immunization coverage in this population is low. There is a need to improve vaccine coverage in this age group. Sanjay Bajaj (Laxmidevi Bajaj Geriatrics and Preventive Research Centre, Nagpur) highlighted the importance of vaccination in the elderly population. A need was felt to raise awareness and educate physicians and healthcare workers in the field of vaccination in the geriatric population.

In the present-day society, social security remains a big challenge for the elderly. As many as 37 million elderly in India continue to work to earn a living, according to the National Sample Survey Organization (2004–05). The enactment of the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, was a legislative milestone. Anand Ambali (Sri B. M. Patil Medical College, Bijapur) in his talk dealt with the issue of elderly abuse.

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