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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Impact of Baby Boomers on Healthcare

A Capstone Submitted to the

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

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By

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HONORS CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

Baby Boomer is a term that is used to describe people born between 1946 and 1964. This generation of people were hard working, confident, and desired a high-quality lifestyle. As the Boomers age, the percentage of Americans over the age of 65 will increase significantly, in return placing a higher demand for health care needs. The purpose of this literature review is to recognize how the Baby Boomers will affect the U.S. healthcare system and identify how the healthcare system and healthcare providers are going to respond to their high demands. The articles used for this literature review are scholarly articles found through CINAHL and Google Search. Key words used in the search were baby boomers, health care, impact, future, chronic conditions, nursing, characteristics, and treatment. Through the research done for this literature review, it was found that as the older adult population 65 years of age and older grows, the prevalence of people with chronic illness or disability increases. This growth increases the need for more healthcare services. Also, there are fewer health care providers in the medical field that will make it difficult to treat the surplus amount of Baby Boomers. Next, research has stated that Baby Boomers are far more different from the generations before them. They are more savvy, assertive, health-conscious, and engaged in their care. Their driven nature, high expectations, and carefree attitudes are going to challenge how health care workers provide care to this population. Lastly, to keep up with the growing numbers of Boomers, hospitals are taking new approaches in the way care is delivered. This includes improving patient flow throughout the hospital, integrating technology into patient care, addressing staff shortages and promoting diversity, and changing the way healthcare providers are communicating with patients about their care. As a result, the U.S. healthcare system is responding to the current and future challenges the Boomers
place on the healthcare system. Nurses and other healthcare providers should be aware of how the Baby Boomers are transforming the medical industry and know how to provide the best quality of care to this population.
Introduction

Baby Boomer is a term that is used to describe people born between 1946 and 1964. This generation of people were hard working, confident, and desired a high-quality lifestyle. Boomers grew up with a sense of security because of postwar economic growth and prosperity. They witnessed the development of televisions and computers, wars such as Vietnam and Korea, the Watergate scandal, oral contraceptives, and legal abortions made available to women, and protests such as the civil rights movement and women’s rights movement (Eifert, Adams, Morrison, & Strack, 2016). This population is a very like-minded group and chose to be different than their parents. They are more likely than previous generations to have earned a college degree and have held a white-collar job. Boomers also have lower rates of marriage, have higher rates of separation and divorce, and gave birth to fewer children. They are wealthier than any other age group but are more likely to spend money rather than save it (Eifert et al., 2016).

The Baby Boomers make up a substantial portion of the U.S. population. As the Boomers age, the percentage of Americans over the age of 65 will increase significantly. The older adult population 65 years of age and older are the ones that use the most health care resources due to the development of more chronic diseases. The increased need for medical care influences America’s health care system (American Hospital Association, 2007).

Impact on Health care System

The prevalence of chronic conditions is growing among Boomers and this directly affects America’s health care system. The number of Baby Boomers with multiple chronic conditions is projected to jump to almost 37 million by 2030 and more than 6 out of every 10 Boomers will be managing more than one chronic condition (American Hospital Association, 2007). The biggest
factors influencing medical spending are chronic illnesses and a patient’s level of disability. As the Boomers age, they will require more health care services due to increasing prevalence of chronic conditions. One chronic condition that is going to be seen in the older adult population is diabetes. By 2030, 14 million Boomers will be living with diabetes and will require continuous medical management in both inpatient and outpatient settings (American Hospital Association, 2007). Another condition is arthritis. The decreased mobility arthritis can cause will force Boomers to seek new alternative therapies, pain control treatments, exercise regimens, and joint replacements (American Hospital Association, 2007). Increased obesity rates will also affect the health care system. Boomers will require new weight management techniques to help the manage the chronic health conditions related to obesity as well as health care settings designed to meet the needs of obese patients (American Hospital Association, 2007). Lastly, falls are another complication that occurs with aging. According to Bragg & Hansen (2015), people in the United States living to the age of 65 will have an average life expectancy of an additional 20 years. As Boomers live longer, continue to be active, and take multiple medications to manage conditions, the chances of getting injured from falls inside and outside of their homes increases. Increased incidences of falls lead to more emergency department visits and hospitalizations. Health care providers will face challenges with preventing and treating falls. (American Hospital Association, 2007). Other common chronic diseases projected to impact the health care system include congestive heart failure, hypertension, coronary artery disease, hearing and vision disorders, stroke, cancer, and dementia (Eifert et al., 2016).

The decreased number of health care providers in the medical field will make it difficult to care for the surplus amount of Baby Boomers. In 2005, there was a U.S. shortage of about 220,000 registered nurses. Now, the gap is predicted to be over one million. To meet the future
demand of registered nurses, it is estimated that the number of new nursing graduates would have to increase by 90% each year (American Hospital Association, 2007). The American Hospital Association (2007) also states that there is a shortage of pharmacists, laboratory and imaging technicians, physicians, and specialists such as endocrinologists, rheumatologists, cardiologists, and orthopedic surgeons.

**How Healthcare Is Responding to the Boomers**

Hospitals all around the U.S. are taking new approaches in the way care is delivered to keep up with the needs of the growing number of Baby Boomers and incidence of chronic disease. One response is improving patient flow throughout different units of the hospital. For example, hospitals are restructuring how patients are triaged in the ED, transferred to the hospital floors and discharged. Improvements in patient flow can free up hospital beds, increasing a hospital’s capacity to treat more patients, and lead to more timely care and increased patient satisfaction (American Hospital Association, 2007).

The use of technology is being integrated into the care of Baby Boomers. Technology makes the aging Baby Boomers lives easier by giving them the opportunity to manage their own care as well as their caregivers (Eifert et al., 2016). According to the American Hospital Association (2010), two-thirds of Americans believe that online access to health and medical information gives people more control over their health care. With the internet at their fingertips, Boomers will have access and knowledge related to their health, well-being, and caregiving. One of the most popular and widely available tools are health-related applications used by patients and their caregivers for chronic disease management (Eifert et al., 2016). Personal health records keep patients informed about their health by giving them access to their medical records. Having the ability to monitor their conditions increases communication among their physicians and
makes them an active participant in their health care. By better coordinating care and keeping patients engaged, hospitals and other health care providers can improve the quality of life of their patients, reduce health care costs, and provide more patient specific resources (American Hospital Association, 2007).

To address staffing shortages and promote diversity, hospitals are recruiting minority clinicians and partnering with nursing schools. They are also offering scholarships, educational loans, internships, and internal programs to ensure hospital staff can meet the demands of their patients (American Hospital Association, 2007).

Baby boomers are far more different from the generations before them. They are more savvy, assertive, health-conscious, and engaged in their care (E. Kahana & B. Kahana, 2014). Their driven nature, high expectations, and carefree attitudes are going to challenge how health care workers provide care to this population. Literature of medical sociology has portrayed older adults as reluctant to speak up to their doctors and passive in communicating about their health care and the focus of patient-centered medicine has been on training physicians to draw out shy and quiet elderly patients and provide them with more thorough information about their health care options (E. Kahana & B. Kahana, 2014). Baby Boomers are changing the way health care providers communicate with older adults. Boomers are among the most avid health care consumers of health care information. They are not afraid to approach their health care providers with greater initiative than any older adults in the past. Boomers value and pursue social engagement and healthy lifestyle behaviors. They also have higher expectations for wellness and independence in later life than any other age group (E. Kahana & B. Kahana, 2014). E. Kahana and B. Kahana (2014) stress the importance of health care workers having the ability to recognize patient values, expectations, and give verbal appraisals of health and quality of life can
promote better communication and shared decision making between the health care provider and patient.

**Conclusion**

The increase of Baby Boomers turning 65 and older and the rising number of chronic conditions found in older adults will reshape the current U.S. health care system. Baby Boomers challenge the health care system because of their high expectations for a better quality of life as they age. They also challenge health care workers by the way they interact with older adult patients because Boomers want to be treated more like the younger population and want to be included in their health care decisions. The impact Baby Boomers leave on the health care system today is going to transform the system for years to come.
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