After Changing Everything Else, Baby Boomers Turn to Aging

The warnings about a super-aged society have been growing ever since the last of more than 75 million members of the post–World War II generation was born in 1964. With the din of those voices now at full volume, how well has the United States—and much of the rest of the world—prepared for aging Baby Boomers?

From the standpoint of gerontologists and geriatricians, not well, said Marla Berg-Weger, 2017–18 chair of GSA’s Social Research, Policy, and Practice (SRPP) section. But neither is all lost in terms of the required health and social systems, she added: “The Baby Boomers really have changed the face of aging. While many people see that as challenging, it also presents us with an opportunity to take better care of older adults than we have historically.”

With an emphasis on that silver lining, Berg-Weger provided her insights into the impact of trends affecting gerontologists in the many areas of GSA member activity in social research, policy, and practice for this 2018 Trends Report.

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1. The Waiting Room is Full – Where are the Providers?

The combination of an increasing lifespan and the huge number of Baby Boomers presents the first hurdle for medical and other health care personnel, including social workers. The chronic diseases of older people can be managed, Berg-Weger noted, but a great deal of care needs to be provided, starting with coordination in the physician’s office.

“...in medicine in particular, the number of students and residents who are pursuing specializations in geriatric medicine is plummeting,” Berg-Weger said. “In other disciplines, it’s not increasing, and it’s historically always been a very, very small percentage of those who specialize in gerontology and geriatrics.” At the same time, funding for training has been shrinking and is at risk in the current climate. Berg-Weger is co-director of one such program at Saint Louis University, the Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program, a Health Resources and Services Administration–funded initiative aimed at providing geriatric education to professionals who provide care for older adults.

“The responsibility is falling on the primary care providers and all the other health- and social-service–related practitioners to fill in the gap and to be equally as knowledgeable about caring for older adults,” Berg-Weger said. “We need to emphasize much more training at all levels and in all disciplines in terms of making sure that health care professionals can provide adequate care to their older patients, that they have knowledge to go through those issues, and that they have the tools in their toolkit. We need to help providers realize that a 70-year-old is physically, emotionally, and socially not going to be like a 25-year-old.”

From a training perspective, Berg-Weger emphasized that the care of the older patient must be integrated into the curriculum and that the importance of teaching this information is realized throughout the educational institution. One lecture at the end of a course—a lecture that may never be given if there’s a snow day—is not enough. “I think what we are striving to do and what we as a society should expect is not that providers are coming out of school or that their training was specialized in older adults, but that they do have a repertoire of skills and fund of knowledge that makes them aware of aging issues,” Berg-Weger said.

Faculty members need to promote the importance of evaluating the older adult from a “biological, psychological, social, and spiritual perspective,” she added. “It’s a multifaceted process to have academic leaders supportive of making sure information about older adults is in the curriculum, hiring the right people to teach and do the research, and ensuring that care of the older adult is institutionalized—it’s part of the curriculum.”

2. Caregiving Is a Stressful Job

In addition to making sure that those who provide health care and related social services understand the older adult, the general population is also growing in its knowledge of and sensitivity to aging-related issues. “An increasing number of people have aging parents,” Berg-Weger said, “and the millions of Baby Boomers are spending increasing time caring for older parents, and now some of the Baby Boomers are being cared for by their families.”

That realization—that family members are taking care of each other—is an important step, Berg-Weger believes. “Informal, unpaid family caregivers provide the overwhelming majority of care—whether that’s physical, emotional, transportation, or hands-on care. Today, perhaps because of the Baby Boomers and the attention they get, there’s been an increased awareness of the role that family caregivers play and how they are the unsung heroes.”

The next step is to take the research developed over the past 40 years and make sure those findings are being translated into policy, practice, and education. Because of the needs of the large generations who are and will be moving into older adulthood, funding is needed to continue the research into the roles that informal caregivers play and what interventions and programs are effective in supporting these roles, Berg-Weger said.

“I think one of the trends is that the research has been showing for many years that caregiving is a stressful job,” Berg-Weger said. “This knowledge is finally making its way into the general population and into the minds of policymakers. There are certainly many rewards that come from caregiving, and when you ask caregivers, they will identify typically a number of positive aspects about the experience. But they will also acknowledge that if you’re caring for someone—and particularly someone with dementia—outside of a residential facility, it becomes a 24-hour job, and they’re very stressed.”

“One of the things we recognize is that you can’t just hand someone a list of support groups in the area and think that’s going to address their immediate or long-term needs,” said Berg-Weger. “One caregiver may benefit greatly from a phone intervention or an in-person support group, whereas that will not meet the needs of the next person. It’s the responsibility of all of us to make sure we have evidence-based programs that have been well-researched to know they’re effective, and we need more than just one avenue for the diverse needs of the caregiving community.”
As people age and need the services of professional caregivers, similar needs arise. “We’re recognizing that being a professional caregiver, at whatever level, can take its toll as well, and we need to make sure that we support the people who are engaged in direct care for older adults,” Berg-Weger said. “Many direct care workers are earning minimum wage, and they have high levels of physical care responsibility. We need to support them through better salaries, support, benefits, and educational opportunities.”

3. Baby Boomers Really Don’t Want to Live in Nursing Homes

For approximately one-third of older adults, the day will come when some form of institutional long-term care is needed. For the Baby Boomers, that day will be delayed as long as possible, Berg-Weger said, because they really do not want to live in traditional skilled care facilities. Aging in place is not just an appealing option—it is the choice where many Baby Boomers are putting their money and the only one they will accept. In addition, Berg-Weger added, “It’s more cost effective to keep people supported and living in their home than it is for them to be in a skilled care facility.”

Community-based options for aging in place should ideally be located in communities that are age-friendly themselves. “We’re having to seriously think about whether our communities are prepared and able to support aging-in-place options,” Berg-Weger said. “Are communities really adequately structured, prioritized to be able to allow people to age in place? There’s the physical structure of the community itself—that includes sidewalks, adequate transportation and alternatives for those who can’t or shouldn’t be driving, adequate housing, and new housing options such as pioneer communities.”

Berg-Weger also would like to make sure that the research produced by members of GSA’s SRPP section and others in these fields gets disseminated to those who should be aware of the findings. “Are decision makers taking full advantage of the research?” she asked. “Are the researchers as well as the policymakers paying attention to the fact that you can have a reasonable quality of life through older adulthood in the community—and have the needed services provided there during those last two or three years of possibly precipitous decline? Are the funding mechanisms in place to address that? Are policy and practice keeping up with the research? That means we need to be talking to each other.”

4. Research Needs to Be Funded

As the Baby Boomers and succeeding generations (including the Millennials, who outnumber the Baby Boomers) age during the 21st century, the situation will not be as in the past. We have never had a world with a greater number of older adults than children, as the U.S. Census Bureau predicts for the mid-2030s. By 2060, the United States could have 600,000 Americans older than 100. This new world will need economic, health care, policy, housing, and infrastructure options that address the reality of this many people living far into older adulthood, often without lifelong partners and many times without children.

“We recognize that we need new models for taking care of older adults,” Berg-Weger explained. “As gerontologists and geriatricians, we need to keep conducting research to develop evidence-based models that we then can help practitioners translate into practice.”

“I think we all are invested in ensuring that we have the needed research both for the Baby Boomers and the generations coming behind us. We will all want to know that the research will result in programs and services that will support us.”

— L. Michael Posey, BS Pharm, MA

GSA Writer and Editor

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For further reading

**Families Caring for an Aging America**, a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. September 13, 2016.

**Transforming Care**: Reporting on Health System Improvement. In Focus: Spreading Innovative Approaches to Dementia Care, by Martha Hostetter and Sarah Klein. December 20, 2017.

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