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Letter to the Editor

Psychiatric challenges among the elderly in Iran: Looking ahead

To the editor,

One of the important health issues worldwide is to pay attention to the elderly population and population growth coefficient of this age group and related health programs.

Iran, as a developing country, has been facing special demographic shifts due to different health policies over the past 40 years. According to statistics, it can be deduced that in the next 30 years, the population pyramid of Iran will comprise 25% of the elderly population, meaning that one out of every four people over the age of 60 is an elderly person. (Database, 2016)

According to the United Nations estimates, by 2050, about 20 percent of the world's population will be in the elderly age range. Meanwhile, Asian developing countries will have the highest rate of elderly population growth. (Database, 2019)

Paying attention to some aspects of the health of the elderly in Iran may reveal signs of future risks for the elderly in Iran.

In an assessment of the prevalence of psychiatric disorders in Iran in 2015, an increase in the prevalence of these disorders in the last 15 years has been highlighted. They reported a prevalence of mental health disorders in people 60–69 years of age 29.44% and in people over 70 years of age 35.09%, the highest prevalence of mental health disorders among the age groups in this nationwide study. (Noorbala et al., 2017)

However, in the 2005 Iranian Psychiatric Disorders Assessment, people older than 65 years with a prevalence of 12.42% of psychiatric disorders, had the highest rate of psychiatric disorders among different age groups after the age group of 41–55 years. (Mohammadi et al., 2005)

As seen in these two studies, there has been a clear increase in psychiatric disorders in the elderly age group over the past few years in Iran.

Another issue regarding the situation of the elderly in Iran is suicide. In a study in one of the southern provinces of Iran, the epidemiology of suicide among elderly people between 2011 and 2016 was evaluated. The rate of suicide attempt and complete suicide rate in people 65 years and older were 21.47 and 4.52 per 100,000 population, respectively. They reported an increase in suicide attempts and complet suicide over the years. (Mokhtari et al., 2019) Easier access to health services systems, and in particular mental health, active intervention and opportunistic interventions in the area of elderly and their caregivers, are thought to be ways to reduce the risk of suicide in the elderly Iranian population.

The next issue to consider is the status of the self-esteem in elderly.Concerning the self esteem status of the Iranian elderly, one study found that about one third of the population under study had low self esteem, and found it to be effective in increasing physical, psychological, and social problems. (Franak et al., 2015) Given the association between low self-esteem and poor quality of life in the elderly (Tavares et al., 2016) and the influence of environmental factors such as exercise on progression of quality of life and self-esteem(Park et al., 2014), it seems that incorporating exercise activities may be one of the strategies needed to improve the status of the elderly in the future of Iran. In addition, lack of regular exercise has been reported as one of the risk factors for depression in the elderly. (Disu et al., 2019)

One of the major issues of interest in the elderly in recent years is the issue of elder abuse. In an Iranian study, the prevalence of elder abuse was reported to be high (48.3%) (Abdi et al., 2018), which is a very worrying figure, and given the high predictable elderly population in the near future, there is a need for serious intervention planning.

In the area of social capital, the status of social capital and its components in Iran was reported above-average, but it was stated that these conditions were far from ideal. (Mohammadi et al., 2019) Reinforcing interpersonal opportunities through increased public awareness, expanding elderly participation-based cultural programs, facilitating the creation of self-help groups in various neighborhoods with the participation of local councils are ways to reach this potential in the elderly population in Iran.

As can be seen, the potential for aging challenges on the one hand, and the different concerns related to the aging population in Iran, cover a wide range of economic, social, cultural, and health conditions that overlap in many situations. The ability of health policy makers to properly understand these challenges and their ability to devise and implement policies in accordance with indigenous conditions is a serious test point, the direct result of which is intertwined with the health conditions of over 25% of the Iranian population for the next 40 years.

Based on similar models across other health domains, considering differences in mental health needs, securing the financial resources needed to implement the policies mentioned, considering serious income constraints based on increasing economic problems and using tools different from those in other areas, in different situations, are some tips for achieving goals. (Tandon et al., 2019)

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