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Opinions of Old Age According to Residents of Polish Public Nursing Homes and Members of the Universities of the Third Age*

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A – research concept and design; B – collection and/or assembly of data; C – data analysis and interpretation; D – writing the article; E – critical revision of the article; F – final approval of article

Abstract

Background. Statistical data from the turn of the 21st century shows a significant increase in the average human life span and, what follows, an extension of old age.

Objectives. The aim of this study was to become familiar with the opinions submitted by respondents regarding aging and old age, health problems connected with aging and preferred health behaviors.

Material and Methods. The research was conducted between January 3rd 2013 and February 15th 2014 on a group of 200 residents of public nursing homes and 200 members of the University of the Third Age using a questionnaire created by the authors.

Results. Forty-two point five per cent of the residents of PNHs and 58.0% of the members of UTAs were of the opinion that old age can be a successful period of life. Sixty-one percent of all participants stated that the elderly are needed in society. According to respondents, the factor which was most important in delaying aging was an active lifestyle (80.0% of residents of PNH vs. 90.0% of UTA members).

Conclusions. Perceptions of elderly people by the seniors are different, complex and multidimensional. The perception of elderly people to society can variously affect (positively or negatively) quality of life in this age group. The results of the study showed small differences between the residents of public nursing homes and students of Universities of the Third Age in the perception of old age. There is a need to integrate seniors with younger generations in order to eliminate the stereotypes prevailing in society about older people (*Adv Clin Exp Med* 2016, 25, 5, 901–906).

Key words: age, nursing home, the elderly, elderly people, perception.

Statistical data from the turn of the 21st century shows a significant increase in the average human life span [1]. The length of a life span and the rate of aging within a society mainly depend on such factors as: genetic predispositions, lifestyle (most often on the level of physical activity and the type of diet) and on environmental factors (the influence of climate on the health of the individual [2]. Evidence also suggests that men age faster than women [2, 3].

Contemplation of old age and “calendar” aging should not mean that at the moment of retiring or

drawing social security we should stop being interested in our surroundings and the changes which occur in them. This time may also be used to, for example, fulfill our dreams or to pursue a hobby.

It is for this reason that, in the seventies of the 20th century, the University of the Third Age was created [4]. Universities of the Third Age [4] play a significant role in the reactivation of the elderly by making it possible for seniors to gain and update knowledge by improving their quality of life, introducing the habit of self-education, acquiring new skills, encouraging activity beneficial to the

* The study was carried out under the project “Studies, research, commercialization – a support program of UMB doctoral students”, Sub-measure 8.2.1 Human Capital Operational Programme, co-financed by the European Union under the European Social Fund.

local community, helping others (volunteering), occupying free time, helping in maintaining social bonds, and through physical and psychological stimulation.

The main aim of this study was to get to know the opinions of the residents of public nursing homes and students of Universities of the Third Age about old age and aging, health problems associated with aging and the preferred health behaviors in both groups.

Material and Methods

The research was carried out between January 3rd 2013 and February 15th 2014, after approval by the Bioethics Committee of the Medical University in Białystok (statute no. R-I-002/651/2012), as well as the consent of: the director of the Public Nursing Home located at 9 Świerkowa street in Białystok, the director of a Public Nursing Home operated by a congregation of Franciscan sisters in Białystok (Zgromadzenie Sióstr Franciszkanek od Cierpiących), the director of the Christian Baptist Public Nursing Home "Nasz Dom" (Our Home) in Białystok, the director of the Public Nursing Home in Giżycko, the director of the "Kombatant" (Veteran) Public Nursing Home in Olsztyn, the president of the University of the Third Age in Białystok, the president of the University of the Golden Age at the Academy of Agro-business in Łomża, the president of the University of the Third Age in Bielsk Podlaski, the director of the Center for the Prevention of Drug Abuse and Social Integration in Giżycko under whose supervision is the Giżycko University of the Third Age and the coordinator of the University of Healthy Seniors operating at the Faculty of Health Sciences of the Medical University of Białystok, and the group of 200 inhabitants of Public Nursing Homes and 200 students of Universities of the Third Age.

The study used a questionnaire created by the authors in order to determine the opinions established in the aim of the study, composed of two parts and containing a total of 57 questions.

The data collected was processed using Microsoft Excel 2010. Statistical analysis was performed by using the χ^2 test and the proportion test with the Bonferroni correction. Statistical hypotheses were verified at the $p = 0.05$ significance level. Calculations were made using the IBM® SPSS® Statistics program, v. 20.0.

Results

Women dominated both study groups (71.2% of the study population). The group of public nursing home residents contained 69.0% women

while the University of the Third Age group consisted of 81.0% women. Over half of the residents of public nursing homes were above 70 years of age while among the members of the Universities of the Third Age, people between the ages of 61–70 were in the majority (51.5%).

In the group of PNH residents, the greatest number of participants had vocational school education (47.0%), while in the group of members of UTAs the situation was reversed with 47.5% of respondents having higher education. A similar percentage in both groups had high school level education (42.0% in the group of PNH residents vs. 45.0% in the group of members of UTAs). The smallest numbers among the respondents were residents of PNHs who had higher education (11.0%) and members of UTAs with vocational school education (7.5%). The differences presented between the two groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

A similar distribution of responses in both groups was recorded to the question "How does age relate to old age?" The inhabitants of nursing homes said that being elderly begins in the age range of "71–75 years" (39.0%), while the students of Universities of the Third Age stated that the beginning of advanced aging takes place at the age of "76 years or more" (58%). The differences between the groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Forty-two point five percent of the residents of PNHs and 58.0% of the members of UTAs were of the opinion that old age can be a successful period of life. It is worth noting that a relatively large number of respondents were not able to specify their opinion in this matter (31.5% of the members of the UTAs; 43.0% of the residents of PNHs). The remaining results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Answers of respondents to the question: "Can old age be a successful period in life?"

			Group		Total
			PNH	UTA	
In your opinion can old age be a successful period in life?	yes	n	85	116	201
		%	42.5	58	50.2
	no	n	29	21	50
		%	14.5	10.5	12.5
	it's hard to say	n	86	63	149
		%	43	31.5	37.3
Total		n	200	200	400
		%	100	100	100

Table 2. Respondent opinion regarding the position of the elderly within society

			Group		Total
			PNH	UTA	
Which of the opinions related to the elderly is the closest to your own views?	The elderly are rather a burden to society	n	47	15	62
		%	23.5	7.5	15.5
	The elderly are needed in society	n	80	164	244
		%	40	82	61
	It's hard to say	n	73	21	94
		%	36.5	10.5	23.5
Total		n	200	200	400
		%	100	100	100

Table 3. Opinions of respondents regarding respect shown to the elderly in society

			Group		Total
			PNH	UTA	
Do you think that the elderly are respected in society?	yes	n	41	26	67
		%	20.5	13	16.7
	no	n	80	98	178
		%	40	49	44.5
	It's hard to say	n	79	76	155
		%	39.5	38	38.8
Total		n	200	200	400
		%	100	100	100

In their answers to the question "Which of the opinions related to the elderly is the closest to your own views?" Sixty-one percent of all participants stated that the elderly are needed in society. This answer was given by a majority of the respondents of the UTA member group (82.0%). In the group of residents of PNHs, this percentage reached 40.0%. The analyzed data has been presented in Table 2.

The next question posed to the respondents asked them in which ways the elderly can be a burden to society. More than half of respondents from the group of residents of PNHs (67.0%) stated that the elderly can be a burden to society because their health care consumes more public money. Fifty-six percent of members of UTA did not agree with this claim. Over 3/4 of respondents in the group of residents of PNHs (79.0%) and 54.5% of members of UTAs believed that seniors may be a social burden because of their dependence on the help of others.

To the question "Do you think that the portrayal of the elderly in the media is correct?" almost half of all respondents answered "It's hard to say."

An even distribution of answers was recorded in relation to showing the elderly respect within society. Forty-four point five percent of all participants were of the opinion that seniors are not respected in society, while a slightly smaller number of respondents (38.8%) could not clearly state whether the elderly are respected in society or not. More detailed data has been presented in Table 3.

Over half the respondents (57.0% of residents of PNHs, 53.5% of members of UTAs) believed that the elderly complain about old age. A low percentage of answers claiming that seniors do not complain about old age has been recorded. Approximately 1/3 of respondents in both groups could not assess this matter.

While contemplating their old age, residents of PNHs were most afraid of suffering (64.0%), being a burden to others (47.5%) and infirmity (44.0%). Members of the UTAs, like residents of PNHs, were most worried about being a burden to others (54.5%), infirmity (46.5%) and suffering (39.5%).

Respondents considered bone and joint ailments and circulatory system diseases as the most frequently occurring health problems among the elderly. Sixty-nine percent of residents of PNHs and members of UTAs chose bone and joint ailments. Similar results were attained in asking respondents about health problems which could cause the greatest hardship for the elderly.

According to respondents, the factor which was most important in delaying aging was an active lifestyle (80.0% of residents of PNHs vs. 90.0% of UTA members). A clean and healthy lifestyle was chosen by 68.0% of PNH residents. Nearly half of respondents of the members of UTAs (48.5%) stated that a factor which could delay the aging process is the feeling of one's self worth.

Nearly half of respondents from the group of residents of PNHs (47.5%) and 68.0% of participants from the group of UTA members were convinced that as seniors they do not have a feeling of emptiness in their life. Emptiness in life was felt by only 15.0% of members of UTAs and 31.0% of residents of PNHs. The differences presented between the two groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). A proportion test displayed significant variance between the group of residents of PNHs and members of UTAs in regard to "yes" and "no" answers ($p < 0.05$).

Nearly half of respondents (49.5%) living in PNHs assess the care provided by PNHs as good, and 39.5% as very good. Only 3.0% of participants claimed that care in PNHs is bad.

In the opinion of 64.0% of participants from the group of UTA members, the support which they receive from these institutions is good. No respondents assessed this support as bad and only 7.0% of them thought of it as not so good.

As many as 82.0% of respondents from the group of residents of PNHs assessed the good care received at the PNH as a benefit of residence, while 55.0% of members of UTAs did not believe that their retained mental efficiency was the result of their membership in the activities conducted by the UTA.

Other major benefits resulting from residing in a public nursing home named by participants from this group were improved quality of life (57.0%) and better psychological well-being (53.5%). In the group of UTA members, major benefits derived from activities coordinated by the UTA, similar to residents of PNHs, were better psychological well-being (66.0%) and remaining physically active (48.0%). The differences presented between the two groups were statistically significant. A proportion test displayed significant variance between the group of residents of PNHs and members of UTAs ($p < 0.05$). Detailed data has been presented in Table 4.

Discussion

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) [5], aging begins after the age of 60. The WHO distinguishes three stages of old age:

- early old age, which lasts from 60 to 74 years old;
- late old age, covering the age range from 75 to 89 years old;
- longevity, beginning at the completion of 90 years old.

Our respondents were mostly convinced that the elderly, as found in our other research [6], refers to 70 years of age and older.

In research conducted in Poland by the Center for Public Opinion Research in November 2009 [7], in answer to the question "Which opinion about the elderly, meaning those who are over 60 or are retired, is closest to your own views?", an overwhelming 87% of respondents chose the answer "The elderly are needed in society", 9% stated that "The elderly rather are a burden on society", and only 4% of participants marked the answer "It's hard to say" [7]. In our own research, the distribution of answers to this question was very similar. Sixty-one percent of respondents were of the opinion that the elderly are needed by society.

Through analysis of the detailed data connected with the negative perception of the elderly by society presented in the Center for Public Opinion Research study [7], it can be clearly seen that a vast majority (94%) believed that "the elderly are rather a burden on society because their health care consumes more public money since they get sick more often and their illnesses are more serious." Over 3/4 of the participants of the study group claim that the elderly require the help of others to live normally therefore they may be a burden to society. According to respondents, the inequality resulting from the privileges enjoyed by seniors such as "discounted fares for public communication which must be paid for by other tax-payers" (60%) was a major problem. Finally, more than half of participants from this group took into account economic factors – lack of contribution to the economic development of the state resulting from inactivity or the ineffectiveness of seniors at work (57%), and paying lower public health insurance premiums (also 57%). Similar results were obtained in our own study.

In the study conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Research among 1022 respondents [7], only 13% of them were confident that elderly people in Poland are respected in society and one in two had a reserved opinion on this subject (they are rather respected). Almost one third of the respondents (31%) did not notice others showing respect for seniors. In our study, 41.3% of participants were of the opinion that elderly people are

Table 4. Assessment of benefits resulting from residing in a PNH/membership in the UTA according to study participants

What type of benefits do you receive as a result of living in a PNH/membership in the UTA?			Group		Total	p-value
			PNH	UTA		
Better psychological well-being	yes	n	107	132	239	0.011
		%	53.5	66	59.8	
	no	n	93	68	161	
		%	46.5	34	40.3	
Total		n	200	200	400	
		%	100	100	100	
Improved quality of life	yes	n	114	37	151	< 0.001
		%	57	18.5	37.8	
	no	n	86	163	249	
		%	43	81.5	62.3	
Total		n	200	200	400	
		%	100	100	100	
Better self-worth	yes	n	84	55	139	0.002
		%	42	27.5	34.8	
	no	n	116	145	261	
		%	58	72.5	65.3	
Total		n	200	200	400	
		%	100	100	100	
Remaining physically active	yes	n	108	84	192	0.016
		%	54	42	48	
	no	n	92	116	208	
		%	46	58	52	
Total		n	200	200	400	
		%	100	100	100	

not respected in society, while 40.5% chose the “It’s hard to say” answer.

When considering their old age, the Poles taking part in the study were most afraid of illness and infirmity (68%) [7]. One in two respondents (50%) was afraid of losing his or her independence, becoming dependent on others and becoming a burden. Over 35% admitted to fearing financial troubles such as problems supporting themselves and bad living conditions. Nearly the same number of participants (34%) dreads loneliness and loss of loved ones. Less often these people speak of being afraid of suffering (20%) or the anxiety connected with the uncertainty of who will be taking care of them in their old age and where and with whom they will live (14%). One respondent

in twenty (5%) is concerned that he will feel unneeded [7]. In a study conducted by Zielińska-Więczkowska and Kędziora-Kornatowska [8], the participants felt the greatest anxiety in connection with contracting a serious illness and becoming dependent on others. In the same study, nearly 69% of respondents to some degree felt emptiness within their life. In our own research, the greatest number of respondents was afraid of becoming a burden to others, infirmity and suffering, while the sense of emptiness was felt by only a small percentage of participants.

A majority of respondents taking part in the Zielińska-Więczkowska and Kędziora-Kornatowska [8] research similar to our own study, were satisfied with the support received by the University

of the Third Age. Thirty-two point five percent of respondents gave the answer “definitely yes” and 60% answered “rather yes” regarding this matter. Among the benefits resulting from membership in this institution, the three which respondents named as the most important included: retention of their mental faculties – 73.8%, greater self-esteem and better psychological well-being – 47.5% and remaining physically active – 42.5% [8].

As a result of the study, the following conclusions were formulated: The perceptions of elderly

people by seniors are different, complex and multidimensional. The perception of elderly people to society can variously affect (positively or negatively) quality of life in this age group. The results of the study showed small differences between the residents of public nursing homes and students of Universities of the Third Age in the perception of old age. There is a need to integrate seniors with younger generations in order to eliminate the prevailing stereotypes in society about older people.

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Conflict of interest: None declared

Received: 25.05.2015

Revised: 26.02.2016

Accepted: 10.03.2016