

GERIATRICS

Dedicated to the Care of Elderly Patients

Frail old people are very different from healthy adults and the care that they require is often specialised and necessitates expert knowledge. At the geriatric unit at Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre, senior citizens receive care and expertise in a dignified environment.

Statistics show that between now and 2050, the total number of people aged 60 years and older will increase from approximately 600 million to about two billion worldwide. And in Africa, where the population is dense and the need overwhelming, only eight doctors have specialised in caring for the elderly.

Necessary care

Dr Brent Tipping, the only admitting

geriatrician in private practice in Gauteng, is head of the geriatric unit at Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre in Johannesburg. The unit is equipped to deal with specific problems and serves as a training facility to maintain a critical knowledge base and to facilitate an interest in skills in managing elderly people. "If we can train people who are



Specialist geriatrician at Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre, Dr Brent Tipping

interested in becoming specialists, we can grow the unit," said Dr Tipping.

"I admit my patients to the ward, where protocols are followed for geriatric care. The team consists of physiotherapists, speech therapists and an occupational therapist. They recognise the limitations older people have and are interested in the fulfilment of patients' needs.

"As a team, we are quite aggressive in, for example, mobilising older folk and making sure that they eat correctly. Often, when older folk go into hospital, it isn't recognised that they simply can't feed themselves or are unable to get to their food; or their teeth have been removed so they can't eat," explained Dr Tipping.

"There are certain simple things that we are mindful of, such as getting patients out and about, making sure that their bowels and their bladders are working - very simple care measures are put in place in this ward."

Dr Tipping has been head of the unit since April 2007 after realising that training in geriatrics was crucial to combat the grave shortage of skills and knowledge in this field of expertise. "As of last year, the unit at Donald Gordon has received accreditation as a training post in geriatric medicine, which we share with Helen Joseph Hospital. The unit was established with a view to start training specialists in the care of older folk."

Sustainable care

The ward can take a maximum of 25 patients at a time, and demand far outweighs supply. As it is, older patients are an increasingly neglected group in the supply-and-demand chain of health. "The demographics of SA show that we are in fact ageing, and despite HIV cutting a hole in the middle of the population pyramid, the proportion of older people will increase over time. At the moment, there are about 5.5 million HIV sufferers in SA and about 3.6 million old people, competing for health resources."

The elderly are increasingly neglected in the supply-and-demand health chain

Although the number of patients at the geriatric unit has to be kept to a minimum, care is given in unlimited quantities. "The nurses are particularly skilled in working with elderly patients; they take care of little things that are taken for granted, such as making sure that patients' hearing aids are in, that they have their glasses on and that their teeth are in," said Dr Tipping.

After patients have been admitted, their stay is limited, as funders are not keen on patients staying long. Despite time constraints, Dr Tipping and his team assist patients and their caregivers in establishing a sustainable plan for each individual. Patients mostly suffer from extreme confusion and may have acute delirium, existing dementia or an acute illness, which leads to more confusion. "They have mobility issues, require orthopaedic surgery, struggle with neurological problems and have had strokes," said Dr Tipping.

A need for care

A single patient can often have coexisting diabetes, hypertension, lung disease, heart disease, endocrine diseases, joint problems and memory problems. "They all go together, so you get to manage a whole person, and a unique whole person. As a geriatrician, you don't only deal with medical problems but assist in how the patient interacts with his or her environment - you try to keep someone, who may be falling apart, interacting with the environment," said Dr Tipping.

Care for life

According to Dr Tipping, commitment is a prerequisite for being a geriatrician. "I'm with my patients on the journey, because they're my patients for life. I'm with them as they are nearing the end - I am there for the end part."

The Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre is a private Academic Hospital providing quality multidisciplinary care.

The centre was established to enhance training of specialists and sub-specialists.

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