

Baby Boomer Update: Boomer Health Challenges

By Stephen F. Barnes, Ph.D.

Just about everything that was predicted five years ago about the Baby Boom generation has turned out to be true. There have also been some surprises. In the next several blogs we will identify and discuss the Boomer surprises. This blog focuses specifically on health issues.

There is a range of health challenges facing Baby Boomers, some of which are just now beginning to come into focus. A major concern, frequently reported by the media, is the sheer number of older people who will be flooding the healthcare system in the next ten to twenty years, and the likelihood that the Medicare and Medicaid parts of the system as currently constituted will become financially insolvent. But there are other systemic issues less well known.

It is important to understand our current healthcare delivery system was shaped following World War II and was designed to prevent illness, and respond to illness or injury—primarily through surgery and medication. It works well, but favors younger patients and those who are relatively healthy across the lifespan. It has not adapted to the huge healthcare challenge on the horizon--chronic illness and disability in old age. And, here come the Baby Boomers living longer than any previous generation of Americans. But despite what they might think and feel today Boomer's will not escape chronic illness and related disabilities at the end of their lives. The final two or three years are frequently expensive, painful, and difficult for sick and disabled elderly due to our fragmented health delivery system, uncoordinated services across a variety of settings (personal home, nursing home, hospital, doctor's office), under diagnosis, ineffective care, and a growing and troubling shortage of paraprofessional caregivers for the elderly (who currently provide three-quarters of care in nursing homes and 90 percent of the care in private homes). As well, the last few years of life for the elderly are frequently stressful for their extended families. "As currently configured, health care and community services simply are not organized to meet the needs of the large and growing number of people facing a long period of progressive illness and disability before death" (Lynn and Adamson, 2003).

Here are some other health surprises. Already one out of every five individuals takes a pill daily to relieve acute aches, pain, and soreness. Although we do not know why, Boomers in the 45-64 age range are much more likely to seek medical care for headaches than younger adults or persons over 65. Likewise, more than half of all patients reporting chronic pain today are over 55.

With a longer life expectancy many Boomers will live to see their joints and spines wear out, along with certain vital organs. In the words of Dr. Pamela Palmer, director of the

U.C. San Francisco PainCARE Center, "...growing old is not for the faint of heart. Too many people over the age of 60 have pain and related depression or anxiety that robs them of their quality of life."

Members of the Baby Boom generation are more obese and achieved this status at younger ages than their parents. Comparing the two generations, 14%–18% of the Silent Generation were obese at 35–44 years, 28%–32% of the youngest Baby Boomers were obese at 35-44 years of age.

In a recent and somewhat surprising study by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health, Baby Boomers (middle-aged adults) who drank more than one soft drink daily, either diet or regular, have an increased health risk by more than 40 percent of either having or developing metabolic syndrome, a cluster of conditions that elevate the likelihood of heart disease and diabetes.

There is one final health surprise. A 2008 health survey by the Lincoln Retirement Institute detected an "overconfidence effect." Boomers surveyed believed they could prepare adequately for their late life health needs through healthy lifestyle choices, higher investment yields, and more savings to cover long-term health care issues. Should long-term care become a financial burden, 49 percent stated they would rely on Medicare and 45 percent on private health insurance. In reality, those sources offer little support for long-term health expenses.

Late life aging and dying in the 21st century are going to become very challenging for many of us.

Additional Reading

12 Health Risks of Aging that Baby Boomers Can Avoid (U.S. News, 2009)

<http://health.usnews.com/articles/health/baby-boomer-health/2009/01/28/12-health-risks-of-aging-that-baby-boomers-can-avoid.html>

Living Well at the End of Life; Adapting Health Care to Serious Chronic Illness in Old Age (Lynn and Adamson, 2003)

http://www.rand.org/pubs/white_papers/2005/WP137.pdf

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