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Julian studies seniors' problem

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MORE ON

DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION
Senior citizens are also widely affected by the policy of deinstitutionalization. Ontario's population is rapidly aging. By the year 2001, with the post war baby boom moving up the age scale, 13.6 per cent of the total population will be over 65, compared with 8.9 per cent in 1976. 1978 statistics from the Treasury Ministry confirm that not only is the elderly population growing at a much faster rate than the population at large, but more significantly, the 75-plus group, who need the greatest amount of health care and use a disproportionate number of hospital beds, will increase by 120.6 per cent! In Metro Toronto, for example, 206,000 people, representing one in ten, are now over 65, one in four are over 50 years of age.

The social and economic implications of this "geriatric boom" have been widely discussed for the past five years. The Provincial Government has recognized that we must, where possible, care for the elderly outside our costly medical framework and has voiced its support for the community-based service approach. But, as with the mentally ill, the concept of non-institutionalization has not been translated into the development of a comprehensive system of home support and community services. Cut-backs on institutional beds have not been matched to a corresponding expansion of alternative community services.

Two Provincial Ministries - Health and Community and Social Services (ComSoc), share responsibility for services to the elderly. Both Ministries provide programs in institutions and both look after certain home support services. Each program has its own eligibility rules, user fees and funding formulas. For instance, both Ministries provide nursing and home-making services. A patient who has been released from hospital can obtain free-of-charge, nursing or home-making services for a short period of time through a program called Home Care, which is funded by OHIP; if that same person needs this help on a long term basis or if the person did not go to hospital, ComSoc will provide the service under the Homemakers and Nurses Services program and there will be a user charge. Legislative fragmentation leads to manipulation and overuse of the Home Care program as well as gaps in the continuum of support services for seniors. This continuum must be created if we really intend to maintain the independence of elderly citizens, and prevent or postpone institutionalization.

Often the split seems completely artificial. On the institutional side, three different levels of care, known as "residential", "extended" and "chronic", are provided in different facilities. For instance, both nursing homes and homes for the aged provide "extended care" services - a minimum of 1.5 hours of nursing care per day. Although these services are similar in each of the facilities, the sources of funding and funding formulae are different. Nursing homes are privately owned and operated under contract to the Ministry of Health. Homes for the Aged are non-profit, run by either charitable organizations or municipal corporations. The original distinction between different types of institutions offering different levels of care has become very blurred. As a result, the consumer faces a confusing set of rates, with costs varying according to the type of care and institution. Many elderly people end up receiving a level of care not suited to their needs.

Clearly, what is needed is a comprehensive policy on home support services, an overall plan, combined with long term objectives, reliable estimates of present and future need, and a clear definition of the range of services which need to be funded, the basis for deciding whether new programs are to be funded. Moreover, comprehensive community health-social services planning is only one aspect. Reducing this Province's high rate of institutionalization for seniors (which at 8.9 per cent is the third highest in Canada, and much higher than those of the U.S. and England) will depend on changes in other fields - notably income security as well as housing and transportation.

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