HEALTH CONDITIONS OF OLDER ADULTS WHO UTILIZE HEALTH SERVICES AT THE SOCIAL WELFARE DEVELOPMENT CENTER FOR THE ELDERLY IN PATHUMTHANI PROVINCE, THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite the fact that older adults now live longer and enjoy healthier lives, statistics show that 51.6% of older Thai adults go without an annual check-up and 53.9% live with chronic health conditions. The study on health conditions of older adults will be used as evidence data for improving health conditions and long-term care for the older Thai adults.

Objective: To study health conditions of older adults who utilize services at the Social Welfare Development Center for Elderly in Pathumthani Province, Thailand.

Methods: A descriptive study was conducted throughout July 2012 to February 2013. Fifty adults aged 60 years and over with good consciousness and able to communicate well were selected via purposive sampling. Research instruments included a Demographic Form and a Physical Health Assessment Form. Ethical consideration of human rights protection was considered for the duration of the study. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Data were collected via health assessment interview and physical assessment of bodily systems. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results: The study found that only 60% of the older adults attended an annual physical check-up. The older adults lived with chronic health problems such as cardiovascular disorders, neuromuscular disorders, visual impairment, genitourinary tract disorders, respiratory disorders and gastrointestinal and metabolic disorders.
Conclusions/Recommendations: Physical changes and functional disorders in multi-systems of the body especially pertaining to cardiovascular, neuromuscular and visual systems indicate the need for chronic care of older Thai adults. Additionally, forty percent of the subjects had never attended an annual physical check-up; this reflects the need for annual physical check-ups and activities to improve health status.

Keywords: health condition, older adults, Social Welfare Development Center

BACKGROUND

During the period of 1964 - 2010 life expectancy at birth among Thai populace increased from 55.9 years to 70.6 in males and from 62.0 to 77.5 in females. The life expectancy among Thai populace is expected to reach 76.0 for males and 82.7 for females in 2030 [1]. The number of older Thai adults is expected to rise from approximately 7.2 million in 2010 to 11 million by 2020 [2]. Despite the fact that this group is living longer and enjoying healthier lives, statistics show that 51.6% go without an annual check-up and 53.9% live with chronic health conditions; this puts individuals at risk of requiring long-term care [3,4,5,6]. The major health problems in this group include: diseases of the musculoskeletal system and connective tissue as well as the respiratory and cardiovascular systems [6,7,8]. What’s more, problems with visual impairment, hearing loss and bowel incontinence increase substantially with age [4,7,8].

According to the Thai Constitution, a Thai person who is over sixty years of age and has insufficient income for living shall have the right to welfare, public facilities and appropriate aids from the State [9,10]. The Social Welfare Development Center for the Elderly in Pathumthani Province is an organization under supervision of the Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. The organization provides service by offering long-term residential homes for low-income older adults who cannot stay with their families or have no relatives to stay with [8,10]. Older adults who are eligible to stay in The Social Welfare Development Center have to be independent and not require direct nursing care. These older adults receive care from staff of the organization if they become frail or unable to be independent. A development care service in the community and at home for dependent older persons operated by the government and the Ministry of Public Health must be set up [8]. Thus, the study of health
conditions in older adults will be used as evidential data for developing a program to support those with health conditions as well as long-term care.

**OBJECTIVES**

To study health conditions of older adults who utilize services at the Social Welfare Development Center for the Elderly in Pathumthani Province, Thailand.

**METHODS**

A descriptive study was conducted throughout July 2012 to February 2013. Fifty adults aged 60 years and over who met criteria with good consciousness and could communicate well were selected via purposive sampling.

Research instruments used were the Demographic Form and the Physical Health Assessment Form. The Demographic Form (DF) developed by the Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare has generally been used in the Social Welfare Development Center for the Elderly in Thailand. The DF included age, sex, marital status, education level, leisure time and hobbies, frequency of participation in social activities, list of daily or routine medication and history of annual physical check-up. The Physical Health Assessment Form (PHAF) was developed by the Faculty of Nursing, Rangsit University based on bodily systems [11]. Content validity was supported by three experts in elderly nursing.

Data were collected by health assessment interview and physical assessment of bodily systems. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

**Protection of human rights**

Ethical consideration of human rights protection was supported. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Prior to data collection, subjects and staff of the Department of Social Welfare received information regarding the purpose of the study, the methods and instruments in collecting data as well as protection of their rights. The older adults were assured of their right to participate in the study with no effect on their utilizing of services. The identifying information from the study was kept confidential and the overall findings are presented.
RESULTS

Demographic data of older adults

The majority of the participating older adults were aged 71-80 years with a mean age of 73.3 years (SD = 7.4). Fifty six percent were men, 44% were married, and 96% were Buddhists. Forty-six percent had competed education grade 4, 8% had completed a slightly higher level, and 16% had never attended school. Eighty percent were literate able to write using the Thai language. Eight percent were able to read but unable to write and 12% could not read and write using the Thai language.

Leisure time and hobbies

While attending The Social Welfare Development Center, the participants responded that they participated in pastimes such as daytime sleeping (42%), prayer (36%), watching television (30%), listening to music (28%) reading a newspaper, book or magazine (24%), doing handicrafts (18%), gardening (14%), and singing and dancing (12%).

Frequency of participation in social activities

Twenty-two percent reported that they participated in all of the activities provided by the Social Welfare staff. Fifty-six percent frequently participated, 14% sometimes participated, and 8% never attended.

List of daily and routine medication

Sixty percent of the older adults responded that they used medication for treatment of a disease. These medications included antihypertensive drugs (16%), antihypertensive with anti-diabetic drugs (8%), anti-diabetic drugs (6%), analgesic drugs (8%), vitamins (6%), asthma medication (4%) and 2% used other drugs such as diuretics, antihypertensive drugs with diuretics, antacids, anticonvulsive drugs, and medications for the treatment of kidney disease and osteoporosis.

History of annual physical check-up

The study found that only 60% of individuals attended an annual physical check-up whereas 40% never had an annual physical check-up. However, twelve percent of the older adults who had had an annual physical check-up reported that the last check-up was at least three years ago.
Health condition of subjects

By physical examination, 88% had bodily system disorders. Twenty-eight percent had a disorder in three or more bodily systems and thirty percent had one or two disorders (Figure 1). Review by system showed that 64% had cardiovascular disorders, 42% had neuromuscular disorders, 34% had visual impairment, 28% had genitourinary disorders, 24% had respiratory disorders, and 22% had gastrointestinal and metabolic disorders (Figure 2).

Figure1. Number of system disorders in older adults who utilized services at the Social Welfare Development Center

Figure2. System disorders of the older adults who utilized services at the Social Welfare Development centre

DISCUSSION

Health conditions of subjects

Results found in the study are congruent with previous studies in that older Thai adults are living longer [1,2] (mean age 73.3 years ± 7.4) with chronic health problems [3-8]. Physical changes and functional disorders are resulting from aging and indicate the need for long-term care. Moreover, physical health assessment showed that 66% of older Thai adults reflect that their current health condition is correlated with multi-system disorders. This corresponds with the results from physical assessment studies which found multi-system disorders in the Thai elderly [6-8]. Hypertension, diabetes mellitus and muscle aches remain common health conditions found in the elderly who utilize services at the Social Welfare Development Center for the Elderly in Pathumthani Province.
Most subjects preferred to partake in leisure and hobbies via activities requiring low mobility like daytime sleeping, prayer, watching television and reading. This is likely to be the result of physical changes and chronic health conditions - especially those that affect mobility creating the need to rest to reserve energy for performing activities of daily living. Nevertheless, most responded that they participated in activities provided by the personnel of the Social Welfare Development Center.

The study found that 60% of subjects had an annual physical check-up whereas 40% never did. This may be a result of the policy of the Department of the Social Welfare that recruited independent older adults who had no need for nursing care [8]. However, when subjects were ill or needed to attend follow-up with a physician the staff and social workers took them to the hospital near the organization.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Physical changes and functional disorders in multi-systems of the body - especially cardiovascular, neuromuscular and visual systems indicate the need for long-term care in the Thai elderly. Additionally, forty percent had never had an annual physical check-up; this reflects the need for an annual physical check-up and activities to improve or maintain health status.

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