

Respite care

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Synonyms

Home and community care services, home care, day care, overnight service, replacement or alternatives care.

Definition

Respite care is an intermittent community support targeting vulnerable community-dwelling older people in need of personal or nursing care. At the same time, it serves to provide temporary relief to primary family caregivers from continue caregiving responsibilities. The purpose of respite care is to restore resilience and improve the quality of life and wellbeing of caregivers.

Overview

Advancement in medical care and socio-economic development has greatly increased life expectancy worldwide. Old age care is a growing challenge due to the increase in age-related chronic health conditions and degenerative diseases. As recommended in the implementation framework of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), active involvement from communities and families in the care of older people is of equal significance in the continuum of long-term care. However, family caregiving is a demanding task both mentally and physically. They account for about 75% of all personal care, irrespective of the type of healthcare (Kane 1990). The care provided by families for older people with dementia is even more intense. The process of adjustment to the caregiving role requires many commitments and personal sacrifices. Caregivers are at high risk of developing mental and physical problems because of providing constant long-term care. Therefore, respite care is vital to the sustainability of the quality of care from informal caregivers. However, the awareness and utilization of respite care service is not high among caregivers (Roberts and Struckmeyer 2017). This article will discuss on the impacts of and issues related to respite care for older people.

Key Research Findings

Forms and contents of respite care services and programs

Respite care services offers a variety of supports and care with a cost applicable depending on the type and duration of service requested. Services include personal care, nursing care, rehabilitation program, meals preparation, housekeeping, transportation and companionship. Respite may be provided in-home or away from home as in day care or short-stay care homes. The length of care varies from hours to weeks. Apart from providing assistance to family caregivers, day care services also provide supports for the older persons with disabilities or chronic conditions. The services are offered by health workers, nurses, and trained home-helpers. At present, no assessment is required on the level of impairment of older people for service registration. In some countries, policies for respite-related benefits are also in place, such as providing grants or tax credits for family caregivers, and long-term care insurance coverage for respite care (Rose et al. 2015). There are also community-initiated programs, such as the time bank model adopted from Britain and Sweden encouraging reciprocal exchange of help in return of care on activities of daily living among older people.

Impacts of respite care

Despite tangible benefits for caregivers, research on the efficacy of respite care has been very limited, and studies on outcomes for persons receiving respite is even less (Zarit et al. 2017). Furthermore, findings over the years about the effects of respite have been inconsistent. An early study of respite services for caregivers of older people with dementia also demonstrated inconclusive findings on caregiver burden and mental health (Lawton et al. 1989). Other studies on caregiver's mood, health, subjective wellbeing, self-efficacy also showed mixed results (Pinquart and Sorensen 2006; Zabalegui et al. 2014; Zarit et al. 2014). A major conclusion confirmed in most studies on respite care is the low awareness and utilization of respite care services by family caregivers. This indicates the need to educate respite users of the importance of seeking help in the caregiving process early on.

Apart from reducing caregiver's burden, another aim of provision of respite care is to reduce or delay institutionalization in care recipients, but the results again are mixed and sometimes showed negative effect (Vandepitte et al. 2016). Some studies even report an acceleration in the rate of nursing home admission, despite positive results on improving behavioral symptoms (McCann et al. 2005; Kuzuya et al. 2012). It is partly because previous studies on respite care tended to focus on care recipients having specific mental health problem and dementia. In addition, there is inadequate randomized control trials (RCTs) on community-based respite care. After all, current evidence on impacts of respite care on care recipients did not take into account a wide range of confounders, including type of respite care, stage of diseases of the care recipients, and caregiver's reluctances to take up the services.

Prospects

Issues related to respite services and programs

Effective delivery of respite care services relies on understanding of varying caregiving situations and factors that affect the willingness to seek or use respite care. Sometimes, family caregivers may feel reluctant to send their relatives to a day care unit/center even for a brief period. Some may think that it is their filial piety to do the utmost. Others may worry that the eligibility for respite care is determined based on the urgency of service needs or the level of impairment of the care recipient. Often times, the current “one-size-fits-all” approach of service delivery focusing on personal and nursing care is not comprehensive enough to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of caregivers. More creative respite options are needed to meet the complex and multiple needs of respite users. Another pressing issue about respite care is the critical shortage of manpower to support the growing demands for old age services due to a declining labor force, shrinkage in family size and rising old age dependency ratio. Therefore, it is timely to explore alternative ways to keep up with the demands on respite care for the benefits of both older people and their family caregivers.

Future directions for research

There has been considerable interest in the effect of respite care on supporting physical, emotional, spiritual and financial needs of caregivers. Future directions should focus research into areas, such as new services set up and different forms of service delivery. Much more research work is needed to increase understanding of the efficacy of respite care on positive outcomes of persons receiving respite care and their families. At the same time, public education is needed to increase the awareness and understanding of the importance of respite service use at the beginning of the caregiving journey.

Cross-references

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