

Seniors Health SCN

Ageism, Age Discrimination and Health Care

Dr. Robert N. Butler coined the term in the late 1960s to describe negative stereotyping and discrimination against older individuals.¹ Ageism has helped transform the aging process from being viewed as natural into a “social problem” with detrimental consequences for older individuals individually and collectively.

Ageism includes prejudicial attitudes toward older people, old age, and the aging process (including attitudes often held by older people themselves); discriminatory practices against older people in, as examples, employment and the provision of health care; and, policies and practices that perpetuate negative stereotypic beliefs about older people, reducing their opportunities for a satisfactory life and undermining their personal dignity.² While ageism can lead to individual acts of discrimination, of at least equal concern is the specter of institutional ageism as reflected in legislation, policies, programs, and practices. The latter can have a pervasive and often unrecognized impact. Belittling popular language about older persons (e.g., “little old lady”), negative media portrayals of them, and the apocalyptic metaphors used to describe population aging (e.g., Aging Tsunami) reflect what Butler described as the “deep seated uneasiness” held by the young and middle-aged towards aging.^{1,3} These are often based on erroneous beliefs about aging and older persons.

Unfortunately ageism is widespread and the most tolerated form of social prejudice in Canada.⁴ A recent survey found that six-in-ten individuals over 65 years of age felt they had been treated unfairly or differently because of their age. One-in-three Canadians 18 years of age and older admitted to treating someone differently because of their age with an alarming one-in-five believing that older Canadians are a burden to society.⁴

The Seniors Health Strategic Clinical Network (SCN) will raise awareness within Alberta Health Services about ageism. As a first step we need to acknowledge the important and on-going contributions being made by older persons to Alberta. The Seniors Health SCN will play an active role in counteracting negative stereotyping and discrimination of older persons within the health care sector by challenging and correcting misconceptions with accurate information whenever they occur. We will ensure we are non-ageist in all of our internal and external communications.

References:

1. Butler RN: Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry, *The Gerontologist* 1969, 9 (4 part 1): 243-46.
2. Butler RN: Ageism: A Foreward. *Journal of Social Issues* 1980, 36(2): 8-11.
3. Barusch AS: The Aging Tsunami: Time for a New Metaphor? *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 2013, 56:181-84.
4. Revera Report on Ageism. Accessed May 20 2014 - http://www.reveraliving.com/About-Us/Media-Centre/Revera-Report-on-Ageism/docs/Report_Ageism.aspx

More information: <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/health/healthy-living/pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=tn9719>