

Strengthening the health system to provide quality care to aged persons: steps in the right direction

SCENARIO:

In Nepal, socio-economic and human development has contributed to an increase in life expectancy and other demographic changes. The Central Bureau of Statistics 2011, states that numbers of persons aged 60 years and over rose from 1.5 million in 2001 to 2.1 million in 2011, and the proportion of the population classified as senior citizens rose from 6.5% to 9.1%. Global evidence of ageing as an independent risk factor for cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, diabetes and hypertension highlights the chronic health conditions that senior citizens in Nepal are prone to, and the increasing health burden on society as the proportion of seniors grows. While information on the specific health care needs of elderly people in Nepal, and their utilization of health services is limited, small-scale urban studies have found high levels of chronic disease and gaps in health care use. Recent studies show that 70% of senior citizens with a health problem in the past 12 months sought health services and this varied by socio-economic status. People with higher annual incomes, from privileged caste/ethnic backgrounds and living with a partner, were more likely to seek health care than others. Changed social and family patterns, and the shift from traditional to nuclear household arrangements has contributed to the vulnerability of the elderly. Most recently the COVID-19 pandemic has added to the vulnerability of older persons who are more likely to experience a severe form of the disease and mortality.

POLICY TIMELINE:

The Government of Nepal has introduced a number of policies and programmes over the past twenty years to respond to the needs and protect the rights of senior citizens.

2004: The Government initiated the state-funded senior citizen healthcare service programme. This programme included free medical services for senior citizens and the Senior Citizens Health Facilities Fund.

2006: The Senior Citizens Act classified people 60 years and above as senior citizens, and made provisions for their protection and social security, including access to health services.

2010: Aarogya Ashram for senior citizens was introduced but achieved limited coverage. Constrained financial resources, weak institutional and service delivery capacity left the health needs of senior citizens largely unmet.

2019: National Health Policy, the Fifteenth Plan (2019/20 to 2024/25) and the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy of the Health Sector. These policies provide for improving the access of senior citizens to quality health services and strengthening health service delivery to be inclusive and responsive to the needs of senior citizens.

2021: Geriatric Health Service Strategy (2021- 2030) provides direction and accountability for improving health services for the aged in Nepal. It sets out a comprehensive framework for planning, funding and providing healthcare and health protection services to elderly people. The strategy encompasses population-based and service delivery strategies for healthy ageing and covers prevention, resilience building and primary health care as part of the progressive realization of Universal Health Coverage.

2021: Geriatric Health Service Operational Guideline aims to provide health care services for senior citizens in an accessible and convenient manner. The guidelines have provisioned geriatric friendly health care services in various hospitals and designated specialist services free of charge or at subsidized rates to senior citizens including through health insurance. The guideline also sets out senior citizen friendly infrastructure and services.

2022: Geriatric Health Service Protocol makes provisions for providing health services responsive to the needs of senior citizens as per prevailing laws. This includes access to physical infrastructure, beds, accessories, equipment, tools and services required for the operationalization of senior citizen health services, provision of dignified care by health providers, and provision of free and subsidized rates.

STRENGTHENING GERIATRIC CARE:

The FMoHP is placing increasing importance on providing services to meet the needs of senior citizens. An important step has been the provision of dedicated geriatric wards in hospitals. Prior to 2014, there were geriatric wards in only eight referral hospitals. However, with the approval of the geriatric strategy, guidelines and protocol, geriatric wards have been established in 49 hospitals in 2021/22. By the year 2022/23, a total of 61 hospitals will have geriatric wards across 48 districts. Similarly, FMoHP plans to establish geriatric OPD services in 50 and above bedded government hospitals across the country by 2024/25. NHSSP provided technical and financial support to the development of these important policy documents.

Looking forward and next steps: Senior citizens are more likely to be suffering from chronic conditions and multi-morbidities than younger persons, and their functional capacity is often limited. Health services for the elderly therefore have to account for these limitations in health and daily personal and social activities and address the holistic care needs of the aged in partnership with the multiple

institutions that play an important role in healthy ageing including the family, community and local governments. As the government progresses with the roll out of the geriatric strategy, the phase wise priorities will be to:

- Develop and implement information-education-communication strategies to enhance health awareness of senior citizens and their family members.
- Conduct assessments to identify unmet needs of senior citizens, social and financial factors affecting health, elder abuse and elderly care-related low-cost interventions.
- Enhance access to health services of senior citizens from underserved areas in line with the principles of equity and affordability.
- Expand vaccination services to senior citizens and ensure gender equality and social inclusion in healthy ageing of senior citizens.
- Conduct 'geriatric health service' auditing to examine performance and compliance and pave a way for improving the geriatric health accountability of health service institutions.

