



Research Snapshot – Care for Catholic religious’ orders in an ageing population

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Overview.

A short review of academic research in the area of support for ageing Catholic religious' orders was carried out. There is limited work in the area but some papers on what it means to age as part of a religious order, how self-reported wellbeing is affected, and what strategies can be used to support those in this position are available. It has been shown that religiosity significantly moderates relationship between social isolation and psychological well-being in older age (Abolfathi Momtaz et al. 2011). Therefore, it is important to understand how best to support people in this position.

Ageing, changing needs and learning.

Those who have lived a life in religious orders have given a life in services and continuity of the themes and patterns of their lives are important when they are supported in older age. Meila (1999) found that the main themes of life important to aging religious communities were: faith, family, education, friends, community, caring for others, and prayer. The author reports that these themes need to be supported throughout the different abilities and phases that ageing brings.

Mercier, Shelley, Powers (1996) showed that the extent to which relationships were rewarding, perceptions of themselves as women, coping strategies, and perceived self-control were significant during ageing. These were predictive of the self-esteem in Catholic sisters and as a result, influence subjective wellbeing. It is therefore important that environments and services adapt to these changing requirements and continue to evaluate and support the changing nature of individual's vocation. This links to Merrier's (1992) findings that retirement is viewed as a developmental process as ageing orders move through a phase of continued productivity into a phase where personal rewards of aging are valued.

Personal rewards come in different forms. Flynn (2001) reported from interviews with 100 religious sisters, interests focused around further learning and continuing lives of meaningful involvement. Although recent research is limited, learning and education has been explored through developing computer literacy programmes for older religious orders. From observing interactions, assessment of skills and interviews with sisters, Fitzpatrick (2003) revealed of accomplishment and well-being associated with the opportunity to learn a new and "exciting" activities.

Care going forward.

The research above is a short snapshot of research evidence in the past. The key themes that can be taken is that the sense of purpose and serving need to remain. Faith, family, education, friends, community, caring for others, and prayer have been shown to be the key constructs that make life worthwhile, and concur with recent research carried out by SJOG (see Mackrill, 2019). Maintaining these through tailored activities is important.

The weighting to each construct changes with age. Focus around in further learning and continuing lives of meaningful involvement (see Flynn 2001) become a focus. Facilitating these through care is an opportunity to meet the specific needs when caring for religious orders.

As care providers this can be done through developing skills of the individual new ways (e.g. computer literacy) to focus on education and learning. Maintaining meaningful involvement might be achieved through creating or maintaining links with the local communities in which the care is provided.

Research suggests that the more active, healthier, and educated older adults are, the less dependent they are on family and community resources and services (Merriam and Kee, 2014). At the same time, active and healthy elders contribute to community wellbeing through their accumulated life experience, expertise, and service. From a social capital perspective formal, nonformal, and informal learning activities of older adults promote an active and engaged lifestyle that helps create and preserve community. Although this is taken from a secular perspective, creating service models of engagement with the broader communities in which the care in situation, means that sharing life experiences and meaningful interactions can be maintained.

Creating a social network of community environment is a future opportunity. As the number of religious communities reduces, facilitating links between those that remain through use of technologies might offer opportunities. Depending on a person's health, this would offer opportunities to develop skills but also broaden social networks and wider sense of community through linking and partnerships. At SJOG Hospitaller services we support 8 religious services and such an initiative could provide links for residents in each of these.

Summary.

It is clear that caring for religious orders as they age involves specific considerations. Being sensitive to the individual's sense of calling is of up most importance. What this research snapshot indicates is that there is a changing focus of the individuals, moving from a life in service to one that is focused on learning and meaningful involvement. Care needs to be provided in accordance with the regulations and guidance provided by the Care Quality Commission, yet there is opportunity to tailor the environment and service of care to enable learning and involvement. Providing activities that welcome their local community in offers a chance to facilitate a sense of purpose and wellbeing. Learning new skills has been shown to have positive effects and using technologies to link with other religious communities should be explored.

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