Medical Xpress

Gerontologists say research and data should drive policy, budget decisions

November 19 2012

America's top authorities on aging spent the last week at The Gerontological Society of America's Annual Scientific Meeting in San Diego detailing workable solutions to the challenges presented by a rapidly aging population, including the demand for affordable health care, high rates of disease, and retirement security.

With the backdrop of the recent presidential and congressional elections, the so-called "fiscal cliff," and its real threats to social service and entitlement programs for older adults, the timing of the GSA conference—which brought more than 3,900 researchers, educators, practitioners, and policy experts together—has rarely been so ideal. Attendees brought forward new data and scholarship on how to understand the aging process, treat those with age-related disease, and most effectively and efficiently serve older Americans.

"As Congress and the president face the challenge of reducing the deficit, those of us who work in the field of aging have real concerns that short term savings will have long term negative effects," said GSA Policy Advisor Brian Lindberg, MMHS, who serves as director of the Consumer Coalition for Quality Health Care in Washington, DC. "For example, reducing our commitment to the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute on Aging and its aging-related research, including Alzheimer's disease, could cost our nation billions in care costs in the future."

Lindberg chaired a symposium, "Critical Aging Policy Discussions for

the 113th Congress," which explored the significant issues around health care and retirement security that legislators will confront and how aging organizations such as GSA and AARP are presenting their research to mobilize their members and influence senators and representatives.

He was joined by GSA member Cheryl Matheis, AARP's senior vice president for policy, strategy, and international affairs at AARP.

"AARP has spent the last six months engaging our members and the public in a conversation about the future of Social Security and Medicare, and asking them to tell us and their elected officials what they think needs to be done to assure that these programs are there to meet the needs of today's seniors and future generations," Matheis said. "The data we are collecting will provide useful information to Congress on the views of the American people who rely on these programs."

Another session in San Diego focused on new service delivery modes for treating individuals with multiple chronic illnesses. Brad Stuart, MD, chief medical officer of Sutter Care at Home, provided data on the cost savings and high patient ratings for their approach to advanced care, which focuses on understanding what the patient truly wants, care coordination, and reducing unnecessary treatments.

Stuart said that using Sutter's model for providing advanced care will lead to tremendous savings for Medicare both in California and, eventually, on a national level.

GSA's meeting—the country's largest interdisciplinary conference in the field of aging—took place at the San Diego Convention Center from November 14 to 18. The program schedule contained more than 500 scientific sessions featuring research presented for the first time.

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Provided by The Gerontological Society of America

Citation: Gerontologists say research and data should drive policy, budget decisions (2012, November 19) retrieved 19 September 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-11-gerontologists-policy-decisions.html

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