

Seniors suffer from stereotyping

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Seniors are being stereotyped as grouchy, inflexible types who live in nursing homes, when the opposite is true, a new University of Alberta report reveals.

The study quizzed 53 caregivers and 53 non-caregivers of Alzheimer's patients about aging in general and about Alzheimer's disease. Overall knowledge about Alzheimer's and aging was low. The caregivers knew more about Alzheimer's than the non-caregivers but surprisingly, did not know any more about aging.

The study results are published in the latest issue of *Educational Gerontology*.

The results were surprising and of some concern, said lead author Tiana Rust, a PhD candidate in the University of Alberta Department of Psychology.

"Anytime care givers are basing their care on stereotypes rather than the individual's needs, that can be a problem. When expectations are wrong, it could affect behaviour in negative ways," said Rust.

Rust cites instances in which retail clerks speak loudly to seniors before assessing whether they even have hearing problems; or people who expect less from a nursing home resident than he or she is capable of, can undermine the senior's sense of self-esteem.

One of the main misconceptions the study reveals is the number of

seniors in long-term care facilities. While almost 40 per cent of those surveyed thought 25 per cent of people over 65 years of age lived in institutions, only five per cent actually are.

"People who require a stay in long-term care are thought to be either physically or cognitively incapable of living on their own, and if people are assuming that one-quarter of seniors over 65 require that kind of help, that's making the assumption that a lot of older adults aren't capable of caring for themselves," said Rust.

As well, about 60 per cent of those surveyed thought that adaptability to change among people 65 or older was either rare or present among only half of them. In fact, most seniors are adaptable. And almost 40 per cent of care givers assume that most old people feel 'grouchy', when in fact, most say they are seldom angry.

On the test quizzing about Alzheimer's knowledge, 25 per cent of care givers held the misconception that incontinence is always present in Alzheimer's patients. "This was surprising because fewer than 40 per cent of the residents at the care givers' facilities were incontinent," Rust noted.

The study shows that more education is needed about aging, Rust said. "It's important that people learn more about what it is to be an older adult and also to know what Alzheimer's and dementia are about. It is important to recognize that older adults are a very heterogenous group, ranging from very vital and capable to those in the last stages of dementia. They fall all along the continuum."

Source: University of Alberta

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