Who cares for the elderly?

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Carers for the elderly are more likely to be female, aged 70, facing health risks, and under financial stress a Sydney Nursing School and Sydney Medical School study has found.

Results of the three-year study published today in the *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, involving more than 100 families, reported respite care services were not being utilised as carers often faced financial strain and had to prioritise medication requirements, equipment or other health care ahead of respite care.

The study points to the increasingly negative impact caring has on carers' health, says nursing lecturer Dr Christina Aggar. Dr Aggar led the research team measuring the experience of carers in five areas: health, daily schedule, finance, family support and self esteem.

The study found carers were most likely to be an older female, either caring for her elderly husband and or her elderly parents. Their average age was 70 years. More than 80 per cent of participants spent in excess of 20 hours a week caring for their elderly relative. Almost 40 per cent were employed and a quarter had personal health issues.

Dr Aggar says carers are not individually or routinely assessed in regard to their own health and wellbeing or care needs.

"We need to acknowledge and consider carers' needs within the referral process for aged care services - via a comprehensive carer assessment. In particular, health care professionals need to consider carers' health and
emotional wellbeing.

"The detrimental aspects of providing care are a global concern because they affect the capacity of carers to maintain their role and level of support and often results in the separation of and institutionalisation of the frail older person," says Aggar.

The federal government's Aged Care Reform Package Living Longer, Living Better requires carers are supported to enjoy optimum health, and the NSW Carers Recognition Act 2010 mandates assessment of carers, states Aggar.

"We are at a stage where we have an opportunity to implement a process that will detect hidden carers and identify those carers at-risk of poor physical and mental health.

"Evidence has shown that if we can identify carers earlier, particularly those at-risk, it is possible to reduce the negative impact of caring on their health and well-being and prevent impending crisis such as emergency respite."

In most developed countries, healthcare systems offer subsidised care services to frail older people who require care planning and case management to facilitate independent living states Aggar.

"The range of services offered generally includes domestic and personal assistance, transport, home modifications, nursing care, counselling and various forms of respite care.

The Australian government supports carers through respite, counselling services and financial support.

Currently the Australian government relies on family members to
provide aged care to a frail ageing population. The sustainability of this approach to an ageing population should be scrutinised say Dr Aggar.

Provided by University of Sydney

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