

Volunteering to care for elderly can prolong life, study finds

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The study is the first to prove a link between volunteering and the longevity of care recipients. Credit: University of Aberdeen

Volunteering time to care for elderly friends or neighbours could help them live longer, according to a University of Aberdeen study.

It is the first time that scientists have proved a causal link between [volunteering](#) and the longevity of care recipients.

The study has analysed [elderly](#) mortality rates in the years following a major earthquake that struck Kobe in Japan in 1995, which led to a massive increase in volunteers providing long-term daily care to the elderly in affected areas.

By comparing elderly mortality rates in earthquake-hit areas against nearby areas that were unaffected, the study found that mortality was significantly lower in areas where rates of volunteering were high.

Dr Yu Aoki from the University of Aberdeen's Business School is responsible for the study, which has been published in *Oxford Economic Papers*.

She said: "Millions of people across the world work for free, but despite this significant amount of voluntary contributions of labour, formal research on the benefits of volunteering for recipients is scarce."

"This research aims to address that gap in our knowledge by focusing on the Kobe earthquake, which led to a huge volunteer effort where around 1.4 million people volunteered to help those affected.

"The study has specifically focused on the provision of informal elderly care - such as visits to homes for a chat and assistance with daily tasks - and finds that the numbers of people who volunteered for such work considerably increased only in municipalities hit by the earthquake.

"This led to a reduced mortality rate compared to the nearby [areas](#) that were unaffected, which in all likelihood has occurred because of an improvement in the general health conditions of the elderly."

Dr Aoki said that while previous studies have highlighted the benefits of volunteering to volunteers, her study is the first to prove a causal link between volunteering and the longevity of care recipients.

"The findings of this research underline the very real value of volunteering to help [elderly people](#) who might otherwise be struggling with a lack of daily support or loneliness," she said.

"The study also has important implications for societies with ageing populations that face a growing healthcare challenge, and suggests that governments can consider doing more to encourage volunteering as a means to provide the elderly with care."

More information: Yu Aoki. Donating time to charity: working for nothing?, *Oxford Economic Papers* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/oep/gpw048](https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpw048)

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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