NATALIA ULANIECKA

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Alternative forms of support for the elderly: telecare, elderly people's cohousing and intergenerational home-sharing[1]

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This article presents examples of alternative forms of support for the elderly. The first part presents the concept and use of telecare: the information and communication system that monitors the situation of the elderly and alerts in the case of danger. The second part contains the advantages and disadvantages of senior cohousing. The third part is about the idea of intergenerational (senior and student) home-sharing popular in Spain and France and the analysis of the capacity to promote this solution in Poland.

KEY WORDS: old age, telecare, care for the elderly, alternative forms of support for the elderly, senior cohousing

Introduction

According to demographic data and predictions of the UN, we are likely to see a global trend whereby the size of population will

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[1] The paper contains unpublished passages from the thesis: „Opieka formalna i nieformalna nad seniorami – rzeczywistość i perspektywy" supervised by prof. zw. dr. hab. Kazimierz Przyszczypkowski (Department of Educational Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań).

keep shrinking while at the same time the elderly population will steadily grow[2]. The aging of societies, including of the Polish society, will be the outcome of this process[3]. Consequently, social and individual needs regarding elderly care will increase. Besides cultural and social factors, what significantly impacts elderly care is the mental, physical and financial condition of the elderly people, and this is increasingly better compared to previous generations. Therefore, we can surmise that the needs of today's and future elderly people will evolve and head in the direction of the elderly people's maintaining their self-reliance and independence. What is immensely interesting within the broader subject of care and support for the elderly are alternative solutions aimed at improving elderly people's quality of life. The majority of those solutions are addressed to people who are active and quite self-reliant, and whose main elderly needs are proper housing and community facilities as well as leisure and entertainment amenities, and assistance in having their

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[2] It is immensely difficult to define the beginning of old age. Depending on the author or a researcher, the age that can be defined as the onset of the old age ranges from 55 (or even 45) to 70. [M Straś-Romanowska, *Późna dorosłość. Wiek starzenia się*, [in:] ed. B. Harwas-Napierała, J. Trempała, *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka. Charakterystyka okresów życia człowieka*, PWN, Warsaw 2014, pp. 264–265]. Furthermore, there is no consensus regarding the boundaries between different phases of the final stage of human life. Due to the large diversity within the population of elderly people and the smooth 'boundary' of old age, the author assumed that the age criterion is not so relevant anymore and a greater role is played by individual indicators such as: decreased efficiency of biological functions, which correlates with old age, physical and intellectual limitations, as well as retirement. Therefore, within this paper, I will use the term 'elderly people' or 'elderly individuals' or 'the elderly' interchangeably as synonyms, in line with their common significance of "people within their final life stage."

[3] Cf. A. Ptak-Chmielewska, *Stan, struktura i dynamika ludności Polski według prognozy GUS za lata 2003–2030 oraz prognozy ONZ za lata 2000–2050*, [in:] „Zeszyt nr 9. Sekcji Analiz Demograficznych" 2004, pp. 7–27; M. Szczyt, M. Kowalska, *Stan, struktura i dynamika ludności w Europie według prognozy ONZ za lata 2000–2050*, [in:] „Zeszyt nr 9. Sekcji Analiz Demograficznych" 2004, pp. 33–73; M. Stonawski, Stan, *struktura i dynamika ludności świata według prognozy ONZ za lata 2000–2050*, [in:] „Zeszyt nr 9. Sekcji Analiz Demograficznych" 2004, pp. 83–117.

security and independence needs met. Alternative forms of care and support address the evolving elderly people's care needs and expectations. Unfortunately, the majority of the services and solutions offered are for-profit, thus those who can access them are limited to the considerably wealthy individuals. Nevertheless, some of the solutions proposed do not need large expenditure, and so they can be successfully delivered on a larger scale. This paper presents examples of Polish and international good practices in this field. To deliver and disseminate these good practices might be one of the recommendations for the Polish formal and informal care system for elderly individuals.

Telecare[4]

An innovative response to the market needs comes in the form of telecare. It is an ICT system aimed at monitoring the condition and situation of the elderly (prevention of hazards) and reporting any concerning situations (no contact, a fall etc.). The system is based on a transmitter with a very sensitive microphone and a loudspeaker, which can be used hands-free (without the need to lift the handset or dial the number). The elderly individual keeps a small alert system, mostly in the form of a watch or a pendant. When pressed (for example, during a fall or a significant deterioration in well-being etc.), the system immediately calls the intervention centre. The intervention centre has the elderly person's details, including on their health condition and diseases and contact details of people living in their community that can be notified. This makes it possible for the telecarer to assess the situation, notify the relatives or relevant services and oversee the help until they are sure the problem has been successfully solved. Importantly, the devices

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[4] The information on telecare and the operation of the system used herein originate from the website: http://www.zdaniemseniora.pl/teleopieka-aniol-stroz-dla-seniorow/ [access: 10.03.2016].

that make up the system are reliable, water-resistant and do not need charging. The system may also comprise the devices to monitor the elderly individual's body position and vital functions, a wide range of smoke detectors and home security systems. This can be complemented with telemedicine: surprisingly, by means of the devices at the elderly individual's disposal, a physician may carry out some measurements (including pressure) remotely.

Hence, this is an extremely interesting and promising elderly care solution, yet it does come with some disadvantages. A pretty obvious disadvantage is the elderly people's resistance against new technology and their doubts about the way the system operates. The experience of system managers show that elderly individuals are afraid of being wired and excessively controlled due to their associations with the system of microphones and speakers. To address these concerns, one needs to explain the way in which this system works to their prospective users. What is a huge milestone is the moment when initial resistance is being broken – positive experiences among the elderly people who become telecare pioneers in their own communities will raise other elderly people's interest in this form of support. It should be noted, however, that telecare comes with a risk of elderly people's growing increasingly lonely. 'Adequately cared' remotely, they often lose their opportunities to interact with and talk to others while using traditional forms of care. Another problem is the financial aspect. If offered on a commercial basis, telecare is provided at a charge resembling a telephone plan fee. The prices start from a few dozen zlotys per month. In Scandinavian countries, the fees are sponsored by the government, yet in Poland, they are funded by the elderly people themselves or, in some cases, local authorities, as long as the latter agree to that. The author's conversations with the elderly people living in Poznan show that the financial aspect of telecare is a barrier to them. However, what deters them is the very fact of the need to pay a fee rather than the amount of this fee.

It is optimistic that the system is growing increasingly popular and is being deployed in cities across Poland, including Sopot,

Gdyni, Katowice, Koszalin, Poznań, Piła and Opole; at times, it is deployed as free support for the elderly people thanks to local authorities and NGOs. Additionally, as the government and local authorities are growing increasingly aware of telecare, it will likely be subsidized by state authorities. It is important primarily because, without excluding other forms of support, telecare increases improves people's safety and reduces the risk of them receiving no help in critical situations. Thus, we can expect it to become a standard solution in future.

Foreign experience shows that it is an economically efficient and effective solution, which provides the elderly people with care while at the same time maintaining their autonomy and independence; besides, it helps the elderly people stay at homes, in the familiar environment they like[5].

House-sharing for the elderly

Another alternative to institutional care is house-sharing for the elderly people, which is undertaken either formally or informally. The former are self-organized by the elderly people (mostly friends), who move in together in order to help each other. In other words, they form self-help groups, where they keep company to each other and provide each other with mental and physical support. This solution consists in a group of elderly people moving into one or several houses (of the person with the best conditions and who provides their consent) or even buy a house (if the budget allows, designed to meet elderly people's needs and located in the preferred location). An example of such a solution is the story about four friends presented in the film „Zamieszkajmy razem" (dir. Stéphane Robelin). After one of them suffers a heart attack, he is asked by his son, who cannot take care of him, to move to a nursing home. His friends then visit him and, unimpressed by the atmosphere and

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[5] D. López, M. Domènech, *Embodying autonomy in a Home Telecare Service*, "Sociological Review" 2009, No. 56 (s2), pp. 181–195.

the quality of life at this institution, take him from there and move in together. In this case, their self-organized house-share is an act of opposition against institutional care providers and aims to prevent the elderly individual from living there. The elderly move into a home of one of the couples so that they can help each other. This also stimulates their social life at the cost of compromises and the need to adapt to the needs and preferences of other people. It is not by accident that the film was produced in France since such solutions are pretty popular there. In France, there are even organizations such as Cocon 3S, an abbreviation for "the Solidary Single Elderly People's Nest", which pair peers who seek flatmates[6]. In Poland, due to limited finances and the cultural context, such solutions are not popular among unrelated elderly people. However, decisions to move in together when the old age comes are sometimes made by relatives, e. g. siblings. It is possible, however, that in future, when the generation of singles, mindful of their student years, will be entering the old age, this kind of self-help will become widespread.

Another form, which is more formal and has a slightly different profile, is the idea of "joint occupation", whereby compounds of flats and houses are delivered. They are adapted to the needs of the elderly and located in an environment friendly to the elderly people. "Elderly-friendly housing" is growing increasingly popular, not only as commercial solutions executed by developers, who aim to fill in the market niche, but also as projects that are part of local authorities' elderly policies. It is increasingly the case that Polish cities (e. g. Stargard Szczeciński) purchase apartments from developers to resell or rent them to the elderly people at preferential prices[7]. These apartments are free of any design barriers that could pose threat to or trouble the elderly people. Instead, they offer additional amenities to meet all of the special needs in the elderly (broad passages, elevators

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[6] K. Wyrzykowska, *Szalone domy starości we Francji*, http://swiat.newsweek.pl/szalone-domy-starosci-we-francji,73142,1,1.html [access: 10.03.2016].

[7] http://www.polskieradio.pl/5/3/Artykul/425550,Miasta-buduja-osiedla-seniorow [access: 10.03.2016].

and handrails). This model is often integrated with telecare solutions, which adds value and increases elderly people's safety.

Although it might seem that this kind of solution must be very costly and unprofitable, this measure does provide local authorities with certain benefits. In the long-term perspective, local authorities make savings; after all, the longer an elderly person stays self-reliant (this being supported by elderly-adapted apartments and communities), the lower the demand for admissions into day-care institutions, which cost local authorities a great deal.

An example of dedicated elderly-adapted housing is the Community Elderly House in Poznań (*Środowiskowy Dom Emeryta*), delivered at the initiative of Inteligencja Katolicka „Korab Wielkopolski", an outcome of many years of efforts. Adapted to the needs of its elderly residents, the residential complex includes amenities that are not typical of residential complexes; these address the needs of the elderly[8]. The residents have access to medical and rehabilitation services, shared utility rooms, the Elderly Club and the shops and services one needs on a daily basis etc. Relevant facilities and amenities help elderly residents have their medical and social needs met. Socializing and entertainment opportunities are also provided. The advantage of this kind of a solution is that the apartments are fully independent. The elderly people can maintain their privacy and independence while at the same time having easy access to the aspects that are essential due to their age (mostly medical facilities) and which are not always readily available in regular housing communities. In typical neighbourhoods, an elderly person might often need to overcome a series of architectural impediments (stairs, narrow passages). The elderly-dedicated housing estates have those barriers kept at a minimum by original designers[9]. Additionally, thanks to

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[8] A detailed description of the building available at: http://www.budowaroku. pl/laureaci/2010/nagroda-iii-stopnia/15-2010/nagroda-iii-stopnia/48-srodowisko wy-dom-emeryta-w-poznaniu-przy-ul-drewlanskiej-10.html [access: 10.03.2016].

[9] Further information about design barriers and the solutions that can reduce them is available at: I. Benek, *Architektoniczne problemy dostosowania przestrzeni mieszkaniowej dla osób starszych*, [in:] *Przestrzenie starości*, ed. M. Zrałek, Wyższa Szkoła Humanitas, Sosnowiec 2012, pp. 125–140.

the shared functional space, the elderly people can establish close relationships with their neighbours, which promotes integration and may contribute towards development of support groups.

Nevertheless, this idea comes with a risk of elderly ghettoization. By grouping them in age-uniform communities, the elderly people are deprived of the opportunities to interact with other generations. In extreme cases, this may marginalize them and distort the view of the elderly people's role among younger generations, who might have no opportunities to naturally interact with elderly people (for instance neighbours). It can be seen in American cities dedicated to elderly people such as famous Sun City, considered to be the "heaven for the elderly people". As recounted by Monika Magdziak: *The area of 37.8 km² includes a shopping centre, a full-size gold course, a sports centre, a dance and gymnastics studio and 5 various home models. Later on, a hospital was delivered, too*[10]. Drawing great interest, Sun City and other similar places keep expanding, providing their inhabitants with ever more amenities and opportunities to spend their time in an active way and have a wide range of needs met. Built specifically for the elderly people and restricted to people at a given age (to buy a house in Sun City, one needs to be 55 years old or more, and 99% of inhabitants are aged more than 45[11]), they have many advantages but also one big disadvantage: they are becoming enclaves of elderly people, who are isolated from intergenerational realities and have no opportunities to interact with people of different ages.

Similar risks, although at a smaller scale, are related to housing estates and blocks of flats for the elderly that are now being constructed in Poland. What, therefore, seem to be better solutions are the practice of adapting regular residential spaces to the needs of the elderly and residential spaces with disabilities and the housing

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[10] M. Magdziak, *Mieszkalnictwo dla osób starszych w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki Północnej*, "ARCHITECTURAE et ARTIBUS" 2009, No. 1, pp. 41–42.

[11] M. Rudnicka, A. Surdej, G*ospodarka senioralna. Nowy sektor gospodarki narodowej w Polsce*, Centrum im. Adama Smitha, Warsaw 2013, pp. 12–13.

geared towards the elderly needs in a standard fashion. Examples are houses available for everybody that include special apartments adjusted to elderly people's needs (ground-floor apartments built for people with disabilities and the elderly with compromised fitness, other apartments with regular standards as built by the developer). What is extremely advantageous is the idea of Universal Design, whereby apartments are designed and built so that people with various levels of fitness can conveniently use them and that residential space can be readily converted to follow family's changing needs (including physical limitations and disabilities that come with old age). Unfortunately, due to the costs and the space-intensive nature, developers and investors resist this idea, and so we should not expect it to gain widespread popularity anytime soon[12]. Let's also keep in mind that, for practical reasons, this solution will likely attract only future generations of elderly people and the relatively wealthy who can afford newly built apartments. Another non-financial cost is the need to move, which mostly comes with strong stress, especially for the elderly.

An extremely important and much needed kind of help for the elderly people who are not so well-off is the assistance in adapting elderly people's houses to meet the needs that change with age. For that help to be effective and factually cover all elderly people, the responsibility for the renovation, including funding, should be taken by local authorities and governmental bodies. The example of the Netherlands, where apartment conversions and moving into an elderly-adapted apartment are subsidised, shows that this is an important element in supporting the care and self-care of elderly people[13].

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12 E. Niezabitowska, *Mieszkania dla ludzi starych i młodych w kontekście potrzeb i cyklu życia budynku mieszkalnego*, [in:] *Przestrzenie starości*, ed. M. Zrałek, Wyższa Szkoła Humanitas, Sosnowiec 2012, pp. 106–124.

13 E. Gerke, B. Głuszak, *Mieszkalnictwo dla seniorów w Polsce – potrzeby i wyzwania. Głos w sprawie*, Wspólnota Robocza Związków Organizacji Socjalnych, 2013, http://www.wrzos.org.pl/download/STANOWISKO_MieszkalnictwoSeniorow20 13.pdf [access: 10.03.2016].

Intergenerational flatmates

Another joint occupation solution, which also prevents subculturation of the elderly, is 'intergenerational living'. The difference is that it is not peers who are flatmates, but pairs of residents (or less frequently – groups) of various ages. The main benefit of this solution is that the elderly are provided with assistance in exchange for a part of the apartment. And students who seek for an apartment move into apartments of elderly people who seek help. It is a kind of a barter exchange between the old person and the student. In exchange for the room, the student offers the old individual company and provides them with help (including with cleaning and shopping). This solution has been growing increasingly popular in Spain and France – to the point that special organizations are being established (such as Ensemble 2 Générations – "Two generations together"), acting as intermediaries between old people and students and spreading the idea of intergenerational living[14]. The positive aspects of this kind of solutions is the increase in intergenerational tolerance and cooperation as well as the following direct benefits for both parties: the old person is provided with care and company (which is of particular importance in the light of elderly people's loneliness); and the young person can use an apartment free of charge or at a small charge, often in an attractive location.

While observing the situation in Poland, including students' apartment preferences, we should assume that this solution is of an incidental nature and will not be hugely popular in future. Paid rooms at elderly people's homes are a niche solution, regarded by students as a solution of the last resort, something that partly results from stereotypes about problematic elderly people and the common opinions that renting a room limits one's freedom. On the other

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[14] Cf. M. Rębała, *Francja: Starzy i młodzi w jednym stają domu*, http://wyborcza.pl/1,75477,17976202,Francja__starzy_i_mlodzi_w_jednym_stoja_domu.html [access: 10.03.2016]; K. Wyrzykowska, *Szalone domy starości we Francji*, http://swiat.newsweek.pl/szalone-domy-starosci-we-francji,73142,1,1.html [access: 10.03.2016].

hand, the elderly people can be mistrustful about the idea of living with an unknown person. Nevertheless, these are just assumptions. After all, these are universal problems, and intergenerational flat-sharing is very popular in France and Spain. An interesting idea for a research project would be to look into cultural factors that impact the level of elderly people's and students' interest in this this solution. Arguably, besides the many cultural and personality-related factors, a huge role is played by the financial aspect. Should assistance be the only 'payment' for the apartment, many students, especially those in poor financial situations, would likely choose to enter such agreements. For the elderly people, this solution is also financially advantageous compared to the professional services offered by nurses and carers.

Therefore, it might be a good idea to promote this concept among elderly people and students. A good way might be to establish cooperation between the Student Government Board and Universities of the Third Age and Elderly Clubs. One can also assume that in future this idea will be used for commercial purposes and businesses will emerge that will connect potential intergenerational flatmates.

Summary

The examples of telecare, elderly people's house-sharing and intergenerational flat-sharing shown in the above section may be a bridge between informal and formal kinds of care and, above all, reduce the deficiencies in supply of traditional forms of care. Additionally, these solutions correspond to the new profile of an elderly individual as a person who is self-reliant, independent and possesses ever-greater internal and external resources. Unfortunately, these solutions are relatively new, and thus absent from the public awareness and seen as a novelty and a curio rather than a real support proposal. In many cases, the barriers are financial matters (which is

the case with the implementation of telecare). The situation in which the possibility to use effective forms of support on condition they have adequate funds is disheartening. Hopefully, funding regulations will be passed in response to the emergence of new solutions to support the elderly so that possibly all elderly people interested could use them. The main goal seems to be to promote the alternative solutions covered herein and the professional management of these solutions (especially for the joint occupation), which would not only improve their use, but also help prevent any possible abuses.

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