

Elderly Population A Growing Concern for Russian Health Ministry

The projected rise in Russia's elderly population is troubling news to Yuri Komarov, MD, PhD, general director of MedSocEconomiInform, which compiles demographic information, performs qualitative research and writes health reports for the Russian Federation Ministry of Health.

According to Komarov, the elderly will increase from 16.7 percent of Russia's population in 1996 to over 25 percent by the year 2020. This rise in the number of older Russians and the concurrent increased need for services for them will place a great strain on an already cash-strapped health ministry, he said.

"This demands a change in the health care system and an improvement in the way expenses are handled for the elderly," Komarov said.

This March, the Russian Federation Health Ministry launched a new health program targeting elderly populations. Working with MedSocEconomiInform, the Health Ministry identified the following priority areas of elderly care as essential for improving the welfare of Russia's older populations:

development of socio-medical programs for the elderly;

recognition of negative psychosocial factors that impact the health of older populations;

development of integrated approaches to caring for the chronically ill elderly that include psychotherapeutic care;

expansion of the number of primary care physicians;

creation of an infrastructure for territorial health facilities that are equipped to address the multiple and complex socio-medical needs of the elderly; and

use of the skills of religious organizations and other similar foundations in caring for the elderly.

Over the course of the next year, the R.F. Health Ministry will address these issues.

But the government does not have enough money to provide adequate care for Russia's elderly, Komarov admitted. The cost of providing care to one person age 60 to 64 is 1.63 times greater than the average amount spent on health care for all ages. That amount grows to 1.8 times for those aged 66 to 69. And for those 70 and older, the cost is 2.37 times higher.

In rural areas, where the elderly comprise 19.5 percent of the total population, the need for services for the aging is much greater, due in part to younger people moving to cities and a subsequent undersupply of care providers, Komarov said.

As the population of elderly citizens grows, the demand for elderly care services will increase by 1.3 times by 2020. Komarov believes that the issue can be addressed by creating specialized geriatric wards within existing hospitals to treat such health problems as heart disease, hypertension and respiratory problems. Komarov said he also supports the idea of developing more cost-effective home health and nursing care programs for the elderly.