

Preparing for the Demographic Tsunami*

The Conservatives are busy searching for their next top five: the big priority ideas upon which to focus their efforts when Parliament resumes. They need not look far. It looms large on their doorstep – in the form of boomers who not only are caring for aging parents but who will soon need their own supports to continue living actively and independently as they move into old age.

Canada ignores this demographic tsunami of demand at our peril. Our population is aging more rapidly than most developed countries. The number of Canadians age 65 and over will double from nearly 4 million in 2001 to almost 8 million by 2026. Seniors will account for 21 percent of the population in 2026, compared with 13 percent in 2001.

Add to this powder keg the estimated 12 percent of the population who currently report some limitations in their everyday activities because of physical, psychological or health

conditions – and there are huge and growing unmet needs. Among Aboriginal Canadians, the proportion who report some form of disability is even higher at 31 percent.

Most seniors will remain healthy well into old age and will continue to lead active lives. But growing numbers will not. Heart attack and stroke are not only leading killers. Those fortunate to survive these health stalkers are often left with serious motor, speech and visual impairment.

Even baby boomers who manage to avoid serious illness will find – despite denial and plastic surgery – that normal aging eventually takes its toll. Canada's health care system is already struggling with long waits to replace worn-out parts.

But the unrelenting demand for medical care and surgical procedures actually will pale in comparison to an equally important need –

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the equipment and supports required for everyday functioning in hearing, sight, mobility and memory. While medical advances have greatly improved the quantity of life, there has been little progress to enhance its associated quality. A key to quality lies in the provision of technical aids and personal supports.

Technical aids include such items as communication devices, visual and hearing aids, washroom equipment, prosthetic and orthotic devices, wheelchairs and walking aids. Personal supports involve several components. Attendant services help with personal needs, such as feeding, bathing and dressing. Homemaker services focus upon household tasks like meal preparation and home maintenance. Home health care provides health-specific services, such as dialysis, in the home. Assistance with communication is another important dimension of personal supports.

So what's the problem? The system in this country that provides technical aids and personal supports – if indeed it can be called a system – is a mess. All levels of government are involved in the provision of technical aids and personal supports through many different avenues whose paths rarely cross. Because diverse departments are responsible for their delivery and funding, any given household must pull together its own package – a complicated and frustrating task at best. Just ask the tens of thousands of families now struggling on this arduous journey.

In addition to coherence, cost is a major barrier. The most recent national Participation and Activity Limitation Survey estimated that some 36 percent of adults face costs related to a functional impairment that are not reimbursed by any public or private plan.

People with lots of money can usually navigate their way through the system – though at considerable time and expense. But those who require extensive support, such as around-the-clock care, often find that even their high incomes do not stretch all that far.

Ironically, Canadians on welfare at the lowest end of the income spectrum may be better off than many households, including the working poor. Welfare recipients may qualify for help with additional costs related to technical aids and personal supports. Unfortunately, it may be preferable to stay on welfare than work if the latter means losing access to supports that they require to function – or even to survive.

There are also problems with access, which are particularly acute in rural and northern regions of the country. There is generally insufficient demand to create a large supply of equipment and personal supports – leaving most households to make their own arrangements. Needless to say, there are many who go with little or without.

The Tories should act now to tackle the challenge of aging that promises only to loom larger with time. They can enhance the supply of technical aids and personal supports through direct investment in these areas. They can take leadership to bring some method to the current madness in the so-called 'system' of aging supports. They can de-link the provision of aids and services from income assistance. And they can call for more accessible design all around – in public spaces as well as commercial and residential buildings – in anticipation of population needs.

Sheer numbers alone will overwhelm the system now in place unless there is a stra-

tegic approach to the provision of essential technical aids and personal supports. Enhancing the quality of life for the booming quantity of Canadians is a big – and good – idea.

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