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Caregivers of Men with Dementia Carry Inordinate Loads

Family members who provide care for men with dementia – usually their wives – are carrying a greater load and receiving less home care services than those who look after women with dementia, according to a new study. This is the case, in part because men who suffer from dementia are generally in poorer health than their female counterparts.

The study based on data from Statistics Canada's 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey found that men with severe dementia were living in their homes longer than women with dementia. According to Dorothy Forbes and colleagues who conducted the study, this implies that caregivers of men are willing and able to care for them longer than those caring for women with dementia.

Almost half of men and women diagnosed with dementia are 80 years or older. More than three-quarters reported that they received help from family members, but less than a third received publicly funded home care services. The authors find this surprising, as almost half were in a worse state of health than they had been a year earlier, and more than half needed help with finances, doing housework, and preparing meals.

Availability and quality of services are two of the reasons cited for the low use of publicly funded home care. Almost half reported the availability of health services in the community as "poor" or "fair"; and a quarter rated the quality of services as also "poor" or "fair".

Satisfaction with Home- and Community-Based Services by Sex For Persons with Dementia						
	Female N=43,202		Male N=48,394		Total N=91,596	
Variables	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Estimated Population Size						
Self-perceived unmet health care needs	4,720	11.1	2,934	6.2	7,654	8.5
Self-perceived unmet home care needs	5,599	13.0 **	2,930	6.1 **	8,529	9.3
Availability of health care services in your community:						
Good - Excellent	8,266	72.0 **	6,706	44.7 **	14,972	56.6
Fair-poor	3,218	28.0 **	8,285	55.3 **	11,504	43.5
Quality of health care services in your community:						
Good-Excellent	9,241	80.5	10,140	67.7	19,382	73.2
Fair - Poor	2,242	19.5	4,840	32.3	7,082	26.8

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Women caregivers, who provide the majority of care in the home, put their own health at risk. Supporting them in their caregiving role is essential, and may prevent the need for costly specialized services and premature institutionalization not only of the person with dementia but of the caregivers themselves.

When it comes to caring, Forbes and her colleagues conclude that gender is a key element that needs to be taken into account when policies and programs are developed, when the needs of care recipients and caregivers are assessed, and when community-based services are provided.

Note: Summary based on Dorothy A. Forbes, S. Lynn Jansen, Maureen Markle-Reid, Pamela Hawranik, Debra Morgan, Sandra Henderson, Beverly Leipert, Shelley Peacock, & Dawn Kingston. 2008. Gender Differences in Use and Availability of Home and Community-Based Services for People with Dementia. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research* 40(1): 38-59.

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