Elderly and long-term care trends and policy in Taiwan: Challenges and opportunities for health care professionals

Hsiu-Hung Wang a,b,*; Shwn-Feng Tsay a,b

a College of Nursing, Kaohsiung Medical University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan
b Bureau of Health, Taichung City Government, Taichung, Taiwan

Received 26 August 2011; accepted 4 November 2011
Available online 6 July 2012

Abstract
The purpose of this article is to address the trends and policy of elderly and long-term care in Taiwan. In response to the increasing demand of an aging society, healthcare professionals play crucial roles in elderly and long-term care and quality assurance of services. This article focuses on the current situation of elderly health care, demands of long-term care, long-term care policy in Taiwan, draft of the Long-term Care Services Act, and draft of the Long-term Care Insurance Act. After the 10-year long-term care project was proposed by the Taiwan government, the supply of health care services and demand for long-term care have created many challenges and opportunities for innovative health professional development. Challenges consist of low old dependency ratio caused by low birth rate, lack of elderly and long-term care related manpower, services and education reform related to long-term care for the future society, and interprofessional collaboration and team work of long-term care. Opportunities include expanding the roles and the career pathways of healthcare professionals, promoting the concepts of active aging and good quality of life, and developing industrial cooperation related to long-term care services. Under these circumstances, healthcare professionals are actively involved in practice, education and research of long-term care services that ensure elderly and disabled people can live a healthier and better life.

Introduction
Aging society is a universal concern. Along with the development of medical technology, the health care delivery system and prolonged life expectancy, the size of the elderly population in Taiwan continues to increase annually. According to national statistics [1], the percentage of the elderly population >65 years of age has increased from 7% in 1993 to 10.6% in 2010. Life expectancy at birth for men in Taiwan is 75.9 years, and 82.5 years for women. It is estimated that the population in Taiwan will double in 2017, and reach 20.1% of the total population in 2050 [2].
indicating that Taiwan is one of the fastest aging countries in the world. Due to the fast growth of the aging population, the needs and demands of long-term care services have become urgent and significant.

As a consequence of this aging population, rising incidence of chronic diseases, miniaturization of family structure, increasing rate of female labor participation, and decreasing human resources of family care in Taiwan society, elderly and long-term care have become important issues reflected in national policies. In response to facing the impact of an aging society, the government of Taiwan has considered the elderly and long-term care services as one of the eight key industries. The number of nursing professionals is approximately 130,000, accounting for about 50% of total medical manpower in Taiwan [1]. There are 7202 nursing professionals providing long-term care services [3], with 5678 of these working at long-term care institutions, 596 providing community-based services, and 928 providing home-based services. The ratio of nurses to elderly people is 30:10,000. Despite hospital-acquired care, nursing professionals have played a crucial role in elderly and long-term care based on home and community services. In the near future, other healthcare professionals including physicians, pharmacists, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, nutritionists, and psychologists are also facing the growing demands of an elderly population in the health service system and health industry.

Current situation of elderly health care

Since 1995, the Taiwan National Health Insurance (NHI) has provided universal and quality healthcare to the people, especially for elderly people. The NHI has subsidized disease screening and prevention and ensured that elderly people have access to health care and a social safety net [4].

Elderly health care is not only aimed at providing health care services for disabled people, but also promoting preventive health and an active aging lifestyle. With the increase in national incomes, improvements in living, health standards and national nutrition, along with advances in health and medical sciences, the reporting of chronic diseases has increased significantly. According to the statistics of Taiwan’s Department of Health, Bureau of Health Promotion, the 10 leading causes of death in 2010 were malignant neoplasms (28.4%), heart disease (10.8%), cerebrovascular diseases (7.0%), pneumonia (6.2%), diabetes (5.7%), accidents and adverse effects (4.6%), chronic diseases of the lower respiratory tract (3.6%), chronic liver diseases and cirrhosis (3.4%), hypertension (2.9%), nephritis, nephritic syndrome and nephrosis (2.8%) [5]. Most of the 10 leading causes of death are caused by chronic diseases.

To minimize the threats of chronic diseases, the Taiwan Department of Health, Bureau of Health Promotion started in 2007 to integrate and implement the resources of elderly health promotion based on regional health care centers. The tasks of elderly health promotion include: physical fitness, fall prevention, healthy diet, oral care, tobacco hazard control, mental health, social participation, preventive care, and screening services. Through risk factor monitoring, national health surveys, and a longitudinal survey of physio-psycho-social health status among middle-aged and elderly populations, the risk management of elderly health promotion can be secured and detected [6].

Demands of long-term care in Taiwan

Traditionally, women and family play important roles in long-term care services. However, family structure in Taiwan has undergone significant changes from 1976 to 2010. According to the statistics of the Ministry of the Interior, the percentage of single occupant households in Taiwan has risen from 3.16% to 27.9%. In particular, the percentage of single elder households has risen from 0.39% to 9.2% and the percentage of elderly couple households has risen from 0.76% to 15.6% [7]. In addition, the population of individual households in Taiwan has decreased from 5.57 people per household in 1961 to 2.96 people per household in 2010 [8].

Moreover, the rise of female participation in the labor force and low birth rate have exacerbated the problems of elderly and long-term care in Taiwan. In Taiwan, married women have accounted for approximately half of the labor force, and the total birth rate per married couple has declined from 2.1 in 1985, to 1.8 in 1995 and 0.89 in 2010 [8]. Compared with other countries, the birth rate of Taiwan is lower than the global rate of 2.7, and 1.6 in developed countries [9]. Regarding the situation mentioned above, families in Taiwan are facing the challenges of continuously maintaining care functions, especially for elderly and long-term care.

Long-term care policy in Taiwan

According to national statistics [10], Taiwan already has 338,000 people with long-term care needs and 53.9% are seniors above the age of 65 years. In response to the increased demands of this aging society, the Taiwan government proposed the 10-year long-term care project (LTCP) in 2007 [11]. The overall goal of this project is to establish a long-term care system to guarantee suitable services for the mentally and physically disabled, to improve independent living ability, promote quality of life, and maintain dignity and autonomy [1]. This project also includes six objectives, seven principles and eight strategies (Table 1). The aim of the LTCP is to construct a multiple, universal, quality, and community-based elderly long-term care system with consideration of the differences in sex, urbanization, race, culture, occupation, economy, and health.

The scope of services in the Taiwan LTCP include: daily care services (such as home services and daily care services), home nursing, home and community-based rehabilitation, respite care, meal services, reimbursement and rental of medical auxiliaries/equipment, transportation services and long-term care institution services [11]. Up to the end of 2010, > 60,000 people had received the services provided by LTCP and 1067 long-term care institutions had provided care services under the principles of LTCP [12].
To provide better services for social and health care, the long-term care management center (LTCMC) is the pivot of promoting local long-term care services. In the LTCP, an LTCMC is designed to be set up in every city or county in Taiwan for resources integration and single-window service delivery. The LTCMC is mainly responsible for assessing citizens’ needs and demands for health care services, developing appropriate care plans, approving the services, and introducing long-term care services to citizens and their families according to their needs. The LTCMC also plays a critical role in setting an annual care program and budget at the regional level, investigating and managing human resources of health care industry, developing human resources of health care, and enhancing employment opportunities [13].

### Draft of Long-Term Care Services Act

For the increasing needs of long-term care services and to be prepared for the rapid growth of the aging population, the draft of the Long-Term Care Services Act was introduced to integrate the resources of long-term care services and enhance the long-term care system. The objectives of this Act are to develop the long-term care system from service and insurance aspects, improve the quality of services, establish regulations for service providers, and protect the rights and interests of disabled clients. The Act will integrate social welfare and health care services to achieve the greatest benefits of caregiving. It will also expand the protection umbrella of social security and provide an opportunity of improving local economic development, including promoting investments of the health care industry, developing human resources of health care, and enhancing employment opportunities [13].

### Draft of Long-Term Care Insurance Act

In addition to the Long-term Care Services Act, the Taiwan government has started to draft the Long-Term Care Insurance Act, which is another important supporting tool for long-term care services. This Act has adopted the single-payer system. The insurance objectives should include all nationals or nationals aged >40 years. The insurance benefits are mainly on the health care services provided by public institutions, and civic groups accompanied by subsidies. Different amount of payments will be delivered according to different levels of disability [13].

### Opportunities for health care professionals in elderly and long-term care

As long-term care services become an emerging health industry, professional knowledge and training should be considered and integrated into the long-term care system. In Taiwan, there are two major types of nursing homes: hospital-based and free-standing. At the end of 2010, there were 391 nursing homes, including 225 (57.5%) free-standing nursing homes, 154 (39.4%) hospital-based nursing homes, and 12 (3.1%) clinic-run nursing homes [14]. In addition to the clinical practice in hospitals, the expanded roles can engage with long-term care demands and create more possibilities and opportunities, including the training and education of entrepreneurs and managers for home care and long-term care facilities; development of professional long-term care resource management; health maintenance of disabled elderly people at homes, communities and institutions; and promotion of various care services.
Challenges for healthcare professionals

An aging population reflects the needs for long-term care services. Long-term care aims to fulfill people's needs when physical or mental disabilities impair their capacity to perform daily activities, such as eating, bathing, dressing, and housekeeping. Being aware of the growing aging population, the Taiwan government has developed the 10-year LTCP and introduced draft acts related to long-term care. However, healthcare professionals in Taiwan still have to face the challenges of long-term care, including low old dependency ratio caused by low birth rate, lack of elderly and long-term care related manpower, services and education reform related to long-term care for the future society, and interprofessional collaboration and teamwork capability of long-term care.

Low old dependency ratio caused by low birth rate

According to the estimation of the Council for Economic Planning and Development, Taiwan, the number of births in Taiwan will decrease from 176,000 in 2010 to 108,000 in 2060 [15]. As a result, the aged dependency ratio is estimated to increase from 35.9% in 2010 to 104.3% in 2060 [15]. This indicates that the ratio of the elderly population depending on the young population was 1:6.9 in 2010 and will be 1:1.2 in 2060. As the ratio increases, there will be an increased burden on families, communities and countries. These results directly affect social network and financial expenditures.

Lack of elderly- and long-term-care-related manpower

The low birth rate, growing old dependency ratio, and the rise in participation of women in the labor force have signaled the problem of reducing family support [16]. The increasing demands of elderly- and long-term-care-related manpower indicate that elderly and disabled people have to rely on outside resources rather than their family to maintain their basic needs, such as home care, home services, and day care. The shortage of elderly- and long-term-care-related manpower is one of the challenges for healthcare professionals in human resource management, enhancing professional competence and on the job training.

Services and education reform related to long-term care for the future society

Due to the changes in family and social structure, long-term care services have to meet the needs and demands of elderly people in Taiwan. Services and education related to long-term care need to be reformed to meet the trends as well. For example, about 33% of elderly people in Taiwan are illiterate or only graduated from elementary school [17]. These illiterate elderly people often have difficulties receiving correct health information, which results in barriers to seeking medical care and healthcare. Services and education related to long-term care have to consider how to communicate with elderly healthcare recipients and to fulfill their needs.

Interprofessional collaboration and teamwork of long-term care

Providing good quality of care should be the priority goal of long-term care services. How the good quality of care actually applies in long-term care services will depend heavily on interprofessional collaboration competence and teamwork capability of healthcare professionals [18]. Healthcare professionals are suggested to pay more attention to this focus to grow out of the existing framework and conditions, develop innovative strategies emphasizing community-based elderly care, improve the effectiveness and efficiency of health care services, and create more opportunities for practice. The optimum goal of long-term care services is to assure the elderly and the disabled can live not only a longer, but also a healthier and better life.

Opportunities for healthcare professionals

Despite the challenges of long-term care, healthcare professionals could seek opportunities in long-term care services, such as promoting concepts of active aging and good quality of life from hospitals to communities, expanding the roles and the career pathways of healthcare professionals, and developing industrial cooperation related to long-term care services.

Promoting the concepts of active aging and good quality of life

With declines in average family sizes and improvements in women's employment prospects, healthcare professionals play an important role in long-term care services. Healthcare professionals are not only health care providers, but also promoters of active aging and good quality of life. The concepts of active aging and good quality of life consist of dignity, autonomy, privacy, individuality, spiritual well-being, and functional outcomes [19]. Healthcare professionals are able to bring these concepts to elderly people from hospitals to communities, and provide long-term care services that are more compatible with a good quality of life.

Expanding the roles and career pathways of healthcare professionals

Facing an aging society, long-term care services will focus on community-based care rather than institutional care. Healthcare professionals could expand roles in long-term care services, including healthcare providers, families and social supporters, health educators and health policy promoters [18]. Healthcare professionals could also develop diverse career pathways in the long-term care services industry through making advanced clinical experience a necessary condition for running a long-term care institution; developing continuing education programs; promoting the linkage of health care services provided among hospitals, communities and institutions; and building capacity for running long-term care institutions or industry.
Developing industrial cooperation related to long-term care services

With growing demands, long-term care services have become one of the fastest growing segments in the healthcare industry. In the past, elderly disabled people could only choose from home care or nursing homes, but now assisted living, retirement centers, and hospice care have been added to the list of options [19]. Health professionals also create more options and opportunities in the long-term care industry through participating in innovation of assistive devices for the elderly, advanced nursing and caring approaches, and antiaging and active aging research.

Conclusion

As a result of the rapidly aging population, low birth rate, increase in chronic diseases, extension of average life expectancy, significant changes in family structure, and the rise in participation of women in the labor force, elderly and long-term care has become an urgent and important issue in Taiwan [16]. Despite the implementation of clinical practice and the provision of care services, the future development of health care professionals in Taiwan should also be focused on education, research and policy development, including cultivating elderly and long-term care specialists, conducting research related to elderly and long-term care services and market demands, as well as being involved in elderly and long-term care policy.

References