Caring for the old in a changing society

In Thailand old people have traditionally been held in great respect and looked after with devotion, but socioeconomic development is eroding this scene. The government is integrating care of the elderly into primary health care, and social support is being given by clubs based on Buddhist temples.

By tradition and culture, Thai people had a high respect for the elderly, especially their parents and grandparents. Children were expected to look after their parents so as to express gratitude to them. Those who did not do so were regarded with disfavour by society. Old people were not expected to work; their only accepted activity was going to the temple and their role in society was clearly very limited. The extended family was the rule. If all members of a family did not live together, one of the children usually looked after the parents. Neglect of the aged was very rare, and the government had no need to provide for them.

However, Western culture, economic development, and medical advances have brought great changes in recent times. Infectious diseases that were leading causes of death can now be prevented and controlled. A family planning programme has reduced the rate of population increase and has helped to increase the proportion of old people (see table).

### Changing proportion of old people in Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Actual number (1000s)</th>
<th>% of total population</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>1696</td>
<td>4.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2308</td>
<td>4.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>3310*</td>
<td>5.98*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>4474*</td>
<td>7.01*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Projection

Low agricultural incomes, and the limited capacity of the land to support a rising population, have forced young people to migrate to either the big cities or foreign countries in order to find jobs. Consequently, the traditional pattern of the young caring for the old is tending to break up. One study indicates that 10% of families are unable to take care of the aged for reasons of employment away from the original home, and that approximately 5% of the aged have to live alone. Today, most people are not guided by moral and religious principles. On the contrary, they are increasingly selfish and show little regard for the aged. And the existing social institutions are not equipped to fill the gap.

The Institute of Social Research (1) reported that 53.3% of the aged were uneducated,

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and that only 35% had finished primary school. Consequently, many old people were unable to lead a productive life. Continuing education is inadequate in both quality and quantity, with the result that old people do not have the information necessary for living a healthy life. The Institute also found that, for economic reasons, about 40% of people over 60 continued working as long as possible. The jobs they did were low-paid and insecure, often in agriculture. In the future, old people will probably have greater difficulty in getting jobs because of competition from more highly qualified young people.

The Institute reported that 32.7% of the elderly were healthy, 50.4% were unhealthy but not afflicted by any particular disease, 14.6% were unwell from time to time, and 1.4% were chronically ill.

The health problems of the elderly differ from those of younger people; their strength declines, and they may suffer mentally as well as physically, especially if they have economic problems. Most old people have malnutrition) and, on the other, because of conditions that are not regarded as preventable but can be controlled or ameliorated (cancer, diabetes, hypertension, ischaemic heart disease, and senility).

How the elderly view themselves

In general, old people want to lead an independent life and maintain their position as a source of advice for younger members of their families. In a survey carried out by the Institute of Social Research, old people indicated that their main problems consisted of irregular income and poor health; other problems included loneliness, lack of purpose, inability to manage property, and difficulties with the opposite sex.

With regard to the happiest period of life, 31% of old people said this had been during their youth, 31% said that it had been when they were married or rearing a family, and 17% gave old age as the happiest time.

About 62% of the interviewees nevertheless thought that they were as happy or happier than other people. Loneliness was not a major problem, and religious faith was a source of strength.

Another study (2) revealed that most elderly people were happy in the extended family and maintained their dignity within it, and that many had modern ideas and were self-confident. However, some considered that their social status had declined and that they received less respect than formerly from younger people.

Social and cultural situation

Living in their own family settings is very important for old people. Unfortunately, as a result of social and economic developments,
the traditional extended family system is gradually changing to a single family system and this is causing a big problem for elderly people who are not self-sufficient. Old people take only a small part in social activities; their main regular activity consists of participation in religious services.

The elderly look at things differently to young people. They are more calm and careful, but find it rather hard to adjust their ways of thinking. Their activities take place at a comparatively slow rate. Their intellectual power has decreased to a degree varying with their genetic make-up and their early experiences. Each old person has a different ability to adjust mentally, socially and emotionally, depending on his or her educational background, economic status, and preparation for old age.

In recognition of the valuable role of elderly people in society, the government has taken steps to revive certain traditions, including those of Mothers’ Day and Songkran Day. On the latter occasion, many activities and services for the elderly are arranged along with celebrations to pay respect to old people, for example the presenting of awards to those who have distinguished themselves in some way. Support should be given by government and private bodies, including the Ministry of Education, religious affairs organizations, public relations agencies, and the mass media. They should encourage people, especially the new generation, to have respect for the old and to feel gratitude for their contribution to the family and society. The elderly should be encouraged to take part in activities connected with their children, e.g., baby-sitting, so that the bonds between generations can be strengthened.

**Clubs for the elderly**

It is essential to abandon the idea that the old should do nothing. Old people can do many kinds of work, and this helps them to support their families. Clubs for the elderly can be used to facilitate joint efforts; for instance, in many rural villages there are handicraft enterprises for the elderly. In addition, suitable employment for the aged should be made available by the business sector.

Since most Thais are Buddhist, the Buddhist temples which exist in every village can be regarded as potential social centres. Most old people are deeply interested in religious services; they usually play vital roles in religious activities and go regularly to the temples. It is obviously desirable for old people’s clubs to be based on the temples, where members can exchange views on various matters and participate in activities of common interest. Furthermore, the clubs can be used as a means of educating old people in health matters.

Curative, preventive and rehabilitative care for the elderly have been part of the country’s primary health care programme since 1984. A pilot scheme has been initiated in a village each of four regions. The aim was to encourage the old people in each village to set up a club for the elderly within the grounds of the temple, under the supervision of the priest. Training courses on the care of the elderly were provided for village health volunteers, village health communicators, and the old people themselves, and reference was made to physical and mental health, disease prevention, rehabilitation, and physical
exercise. The members of the clubs for the elderly carry out activities that are useful to them. The clubs are easy to set up because all the old people have similar life-styles and the same meeting place at the temple. When they get together as a club, they are well placed to develop worthwhile ideas and to play a leading role in religious and traditional activities. They can also learn how to improve their health by proper exercising. The clubs help the aged to have more confidence than previously in their abilities.

It is expected that after the successful operation of the pilot scheme, similar clubs will be developed in other villages. The writer believes that this is the best strategy for implementing the programme for the elderly in Thailand.

References


Getting vaccination to the people

Brazil’s National Vaccination Days have mobilized no less than 400,000 volunteers—from all sections of society—to support the health services in manning over 90,000 vaccination posts and bringing immunization within walking distance of almost every family. At the same time, the country’s mass media have made sure that virtually every parent in the country is well-informed about the time, place, and importance of the immunization days themselves. On television and radio, 30-second immunization advertisements have been broadcast twenty times a day. In the mass-circulation newspapers, pages of editorial have been devoted to the campaign for weeks in advance. On walls and in windows throughout the land, tens of millions of posters have kept the message in front of the public. On bank statements, electricity bills, and lottery tickets, the reminder has gone out that every child should be immunized. In supermarkets and football stadiums, the public address systems have announced the same message. And in 10,000 parishes, Catholic priests and the Church’s 14,000 health workers have talked with millions of parents about vaccinating their children.