

FACT SHEET • APRIL 2008

RETOOLING FOR AN AGING AMERICA: BUILDING THE HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE

SEA CHANGE AHEAD AS BABY BOOMERS AGE

The nation faces an impending health care crisis as the number of older patients with more complex health needs increasingly outpaces the number of health care providers with the knowledge and skills to adequately care for them. As the nation's baby boomers turn 65 and older, fundamental changes in the health care system must take place and greater financial resources must be committed to ensure they can receive the high-quality care they need. Right now, the nation is not prepared to meet the social and health care needs of this population.

The number of older adults in the United States will nearly double between 2005 and 2030 as the 78-million member baby boom generation begins turning 65 in 2011 and as life expectancy for older Americans increases. While a large portion of this group will maintain health and independent functioning well past the age of 65, overall they will contribute to the challenges faced by a heavily burdened Medicare program. More than three-quarters of adults over age 65 suffer from at least one chronic medical condition that requires ongoing care and management. Older adults rely on health care services far more than other segments of the population. Additionally, this group will be the most diverse the nation has ever seen, with more education, increased longevity, widely dispersed families, and more racial and ethnic diversity, making their needs much different than previous generations.

If current reimbursement policies and workforce trends do not change, the nation will continue to fail to ensure that every older American is able to receive high-quality care.

KEY FINDINGS:

- ▶ As the population of older adults grows to comprise approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population, they will face a health care workforce that is too small and critically unprepared to meet their health needs. If our aging family members and friends are to continue to live robustly and in the best possible health, we need bold initiatives designed to
 - boost recruitment and retention of geriatric specialists and health care aides,
 - explore ways to widen the duties and responsibilities of workers at various levels of training,
 - better prepare informal caregivers to tend to the needs of aging family members and friends, and
 - develop new models of health care delivery and payment as old ways sponsored by federal programs such as Medicare prove too ineffective and inefficient.
- ▶ More health care providers need to be trained in the basics of geriatric care and should be capable of caring for older patients.
- ▶ To attract and retain the geriatric specialists and aides that care for older Americans, we need to pay them higher salaries and wages.
- ▶ New payment mechanisms will be required in order for providers to deliver care to older adults more effectively, such as through the use of interdisciplinary care teams.
- ▶ Older adults and their friends and family have a large role to play. Patients can retain their independence by learning how to manage their health, particularly chronic diseases. Training programs should be set up to help family members, friends, and others get the knowledge and skills they need to provide care to their loved ones and to alleviate the stress they may feel from providing this care.



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