

THE NEEDS OF THE AGED

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WE in Canada have become conscious of the so-called "problem" of the aged only in very recent years: later than have some other industrial countries. This tardiness has been in part the result of our previous lack of industrialization, for an agricultural economy experiences very little difficulty with old people, who are still useful to it. Perhaps it is also because we are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as a young nation of sturdy pioneers, living in a country that provides fortunes for all those who have sufficient energy and ambition to work to obtain them, and hence have had scant concern for those whom time and ill-fortune discarded. Now we are looking more squarely at the true situation, but up to the present we have taken little action in regard to the aged.

Our present concern arises from a number of factors. We are increasingly aware that our population is aging. With a decreasing birthrate; improved medical knowledge giving us and our parents the possibility of living longer; increasing industrialization, making us more dependent upon wages, less able to provide for our future, less able to support our parents, less able to shelter them in the family home; an increasing number of single persons with no close family ties; a mounting belief in humanitarian principles and an acceptance of the concept that society has some responsibility for dependent groups; and finally with increased numbers and political consciousness among the aged themselves, who are more vocal in their demands for "security" and for social provision for their needs: for all these reasons public opinion is now in favour of "something" being done about the problem of the aged.

Who are the aged? Some of us tend to think of them as a mass of decrepit people who are unfortunately still with us, and who, because, of our ideas of the sacredness of human life, can not be exterminated and hence have to be provided for; a group of people who sit in the sun or beside the fire, without interests and without desires, simply waiting for death, which may come at any moment. Probably for each of us there are exceptions to this general rule: that "grand old man" who still does a useful job for a few hours each day, or the little old lady who is "Grannie" to every child on the street: these we consider exceptions, and the aged are generally thought of as different from

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these, a mass of useless people for whom humanity demands that some provision be made.

Who are the aged? The aged are people such as you and I will be in a few years' time. We can not estimate exactly how many years it will take, because chronological age does not really determine how old a person is. The rate of aging depends upon a variety of factors: health, experience, and the attitude of other people and of the old person towards himself and towards the fact of growing old.

Each person is an individual. He takes into the period of his advancing years the personality that he has developed in all the years before: his attitudes; the ambitions he has always had, and which now seem beyond accomplishment; the fears he has nurtured and the ways he has learned to control them; his way of adjusting to the anxious and difficult situations of life; all the problems of feeling and emotion, new ones as well as those that have remained unsolved for him. Here remains an individual, and becomes almost more so in his old age clinging to his individuality and conforming less to what society expects. Before, he had a future, and now that future is uncertain. He used to be able to think that if he could not fulfil his ambition at this time, he might next year, or the year after, he used to be able to gamble upon the future, to put off until to-morrow. Now there is impressed almost inescapably upon him that there may not be a to-morrow. He is aware that he no longer has his former physical strength or mental agility. He is facing an end that is inevitable, and, whatever his religious beliefs, he is going from a world with which he is acquainted into "the unknown."

His fears are also concerned with the immediate future. Our society has glorified independence and self-sufficiency; he now fears complete dependence upon others, upon people who do not regard him, or who he thinks regard him, as a nuisance. The possibility of failing body and mind, of pain and of helplessness prey upon him. Ill-health makes him irritable; anxiety and fear make him nervous; uncertainty may make him rigid in his ideas, in a stubborn attempt to prove himself right, or may make him indecisive, unable to make up his own mind. The frustration of failing faculties, and the ambitions that will never now be realized, may make him jealous of younger persons. The unsolved problems of his own life come out into the open; formerly controlled sharply, now in part released from inhibition, the old person may feel that if ever he had a right

complain, to demand, to say what he thinks, now is the time. On the other hand, the person who has lived a satisfying life, who feels that he has enjoyed living and that life has been worth while, who is content with what he has had and with few regrets and little fear of the future, may face old age with equanimity, and the feeling of a well-earned rest.

We think of adolescence as a struggle between the dependency of childhood, and the independence of adulthood, a holding back with regrets for the irresponsibility of younger years and a striving for the greater responsibility of growing up; we can think of old age in reverse, as the struggle between the independence, relative self-sufficiency, and vigorous physical and mental activity of adulthood and the increasing dependence of old age. What that struggle means to us, how upsetting the inevitable biological development is, depends upon the way we have met each problem life has brought us in its successive stages. Presumably if we were really mature, we would enter old age realistically, facing an inevitable situation, with only that degree of conflict that comes in any new situation, knowing that here too we will be able to find a way of living that will give us some degree of satisfaction. Unfortunately few of us attain that degree of maturity.

Here as elsewhere throughout life, the attitude of society has its influence. Society has certain concepts of how it expects the old to behave, and the old themselves have absorbed these ideas through their younger years. These attitudes have not changed as rapidly as the changes in our economy that make a new attitude imperative. We must change our attitudes before we can make adequate provision for the aged in the changing pattern; and this change will in turn help us in our own problem of growing old.

Old age does not come either suddenly or unexpectedly; people who refuse to face the fact that some day they will be old, and to plan for it, are least able to approach it with equanimity.

The aged then are individuals, with the individual personalities, desires, problems and needs. Their problems are created by themselves throughout life, and by society in its attitudes to age. Society which formerly used the old now tends to discard them.

What are the needs of the aged? The same needs as those of any other group in the community. In some degree they must be met in special ways, for a child's needs, the same in

kind as an adult's, must in their solution, take into account fact of childhood, and the needs of the aged must be met in ways which consider the facts of age.

Every person requires food, shelter, clothing and medical care, interests that will be stimulating and satisfying, occupation that will give him pride and confidence and the feeling of being a valued member of his social group, and contact with people to whom he is important, worthy of liking and respect. The old person needs all these things; there are difficulties in his attaining them, and they may not all be attainable for him. Society can do much to make attainment possible for him, but the old person himself must finally be responsible for his own way of living. The fact that he is struggling against dependence emphasizes that in our planning for him, we must plan with him, must treat him as a responsible person to the greatest extent possible, and encourage him to continue to be independent. If we assume that he is dependent, he will rapidly lose the degree of independence of which he is capable, and with it his interest in life. We would thus be hastening for him the process of growing old.

An old person needs food. There is a mistaken idea that old people can eat less expensively than the young because they consume less. Although they may eat less in quantity, the type of food they need and can eat is often more expensive. Generally speaking, they need more protein and less starch; often they are on special diets; and perhaps naturally, they tend to be "fussy" about what they eat. If they are doing their own shopping, they are less able to travel in search of bargains, and the cost of what they purchase is likely to be higher.

An old person needs clothes. Here perhaps he can be more economical, if he is not going out to work regularly. Elderly persons seem to cling to clothes to which they are accustomed regardless of the changing foibles of fashion. Sometimes one wonders whether the eccentricity of dress of some old person does not reflect his feeling of what society expects of him. "They expect me to be eccentric, so I will be." Clothes always reflect a person's attitude, to both himself and others, and the clothes of old people reflect at one time the part they think the community expects them to play and their own increasing egocentricity. Slovenly dress in the aged is often a symbol of acceptance of the fact that society has discarded him and of the futility of fighting that verdict.

An old person needs shelter. This was no problem in a time when people, living in a family home, brought up their large families, and finally gave over the responsibility of the farm to the son; the home was still "home" to the older generation and they remained, often providing extra hands for the household chores. Of course there were difficulties of the mother-in-law variety, but this was the cultural pattern and was to a large extent accepted. But family homes are becoming obsolete. The younger generation is less numerous and not equally able to share the responsibility. A money economy makes the provision for an extra member of the family more difficult, and apartments and bungalows no longer provide the room. The old people are more numerous and live longer, so the responsibility is much heavier. Then there is the phenomenon of the present age: the increasing proportion of unmarried persons who have not provided for their old age by the production of children who may be held responsible for them.

Yet old people need shelter. We in Canada who have given inadequate attention to the whole question of housing have naturally given little attention to this particular problem. The costs of shelter are exorbitant to most people; to the old, with their inelastic and often meagre incomes, they are particularly high. They are not popular as tenants in many boarding houses, and are likely to pay heavily for the poorest accommodation.

Different old people like different kinds of shelter. Some live with the younger generation of their own family, from choice or from necessity, while the young people, anxious to "do what is right," cannot afford the extra room, find that Grannie interferes with the care of the children, or suffer from the extra work and expense. Other old people want to continue to live in their own quarters, among their own belongings, and the time often comes when their children or friends feel concerned about the physical demands this makes upon them. If self-contained quarters were available where some type of oversight was provided, both Grannie and the children might be more satisfied. Bungalows could be built with an extra wing, providing both independence and proximity. Housing estates might include a certain number of units for single individuals and couples, designed for the comfort of the aged. Generally old people prefer to live in a normal community with other groups, rather than in a housing project for the aged alone for in this way they remain closer to the stream of life. Co-operative boarding houses

are another possibility, sponsored by a non-profit organization and provided with a "landlady" who will help with the problems of marketing, laundry, heavy cleaning, and the occasional breakfast in bed. Foster homes have been suggested and used in a small way in several places, for those who wish to live with a family group, but the aged need help in finding suitable homes for this purpose.

Institutions? This is the age-old solution for the care of the aged. Those who are physically or mentally sick need medical care in an institution; their need is for medical care, not for shelter. Those who are reasonably well are not generally anxious to live in a large group. Group living of any kind is radically different from other ways of living, and the adjustment to it is not easy for anyone: the aged find it hard, but at present many of them have little choice. Generally an institution means the separation of man and wife, the sacrifice of practically all of one's personal possessions, often separation from the community with which one is familiar, lack of privacy, and at least some degree of regimentation. The cottage type of institution can minimize these disadvantages, and enable persons to retain at least some of the things they treasure, to go to their familiar church, to see their friends, to have privacy and yet have the degree of supervision that is desirable. Cottages are readily adaptable to the need for accommodation, somewhat more demanding in staff requirements, but, most important of all, much more suitable to the needs and desires of the old people themselves.

The medical care of the old is another problem. They naturally expect more serious illness, more severe and more prolonged than when they were young. Sometime we may solve the problem of medical care for our entire population; in the meantime, there is particular need for this group. Traditionally medical care for those who can not pay has been provided by hospitals and clinics. To travel a long distance to a clinic, to wait for hours in the waiting room is difficult for any sick person, and particularly so for the aged. The old person should be able to go to a doctor's office, and preferably to the doctor's home, if he has always known, or to have the doctor come to him; if he can not afford this with his own income, it should be provided for him. Although some kind of medical care is available in different amounts in different provinces, to those in receipt of age pensions, the provisions could be substantially improved.

An old person needs occupation. He is better physical

and mentally if he is able to pursue his customary routine of daily living, to feel that he is still contributing to society, to take pride in his skill of workmanship or his ability to carry responsibility, to be "one of the gang" instead of a discard. In an agricultural economy, this was not a difficulty; there were always some chores around the farm for which grandfather and grandmother could take responsibility. In an industrial economy, it becomes a very different problem. Industry seems ready to release its workers from employment before the men themselves are ready to lay down their tools. Usually the old person wants to remain at work, often because he needs the money, probably just as often because he realizes that when he stops working he will age rapidly. The fact of working stimulates him physically and mentally, and when the job is no longer his he quickly becomes old. There is no doubt that many employers consider a man or a woman too old before he is actually incapable. They place a premium upon youth and vigour, and discount experience and stability; if he is too old for the job he is doing, they make little effort to find him a job which he can do, and in which his long familiarity with the type of work will be an advantage. It is easier for him to work in the place and with the materials to which he is accustomed than to try to get other employment.

Occupation, however, is not necessarily paid employment. The housewife wants to continue to be a housewife, to take responsibility for her own domestic arrangements. The man no longer in employment may devote more time to his garden or pursue his carpentry at home either as a hobby or as a method of earning a little money, in his own time and at his own pace. Occupations of this sort develop out of the interests people have found in their early days, and their importance in old age emphasizes the mistake of a person in the prime of life who devotes every minute to his business, so that when work ceases for him, nothing in life remains. This is one way in which people can plan for old age. It is far simpler and more satisfying to have time to do the things one always did and wanted to do more frequently than it is to have all one's interests cease with one's work.

Material needs cost money, and the aged must either be given these things or the wherewithal to purchase them, if they are not able to provide them for themselves. Financial security is in itself a need of the aged: to be able to rest assured that there is sufficient money from some source to provide for the daily

necessities for the rest of life, an unknown length of time. When we are young we rely on our day by day ability to provide and are still haunted by the prospect of the "rainy day", but the old person can no longer place his faith in his ability to provide through his own labour. He is dependent upon the amount he has been able to accumulate, an amount of uncertain value in times of soaring prices, an amount that has to be spread over an unknown period and cover both the usual and the extraordinary costs. Or he is dependent upon his children or relatives. Frequently, in actual fact, the aged has no resources. Without financial security "peaceful old age" is a misconception. The rising standard and cost of living has demanded greater expenditure from him when he was younger; the money economy has deprived him of the basic security of the farm; the increased span of his life has made it more difficult for him to accumulate enough. The same reasons have increased the difficulties of children called upon to support their parents, and this has been recognized in the growing tendency not to enforce laws that make this demand. At the same time unemployment and the fear of unemployment, the tempo of industry and the financial implications of superannuation schemes have brought on the part of employers and to some extent the younger workers, an attitude that the old are "too old" for industry, that they should give way to younger men at ages when the so-called old have still theoretically, many working years ahead of them. "Too old a forty." Whether or not a person is too old depends upon physical and mental condition, and the type of employment, but from the labour market's point of view it is apt to depend on the number of jobs available. We can argue for a change of attitude upon the part of employer and worker, but that change is possible only to a limited extent in view of our attitude that the employment of the older person should not cause the unemployment of the younger one. Yet we recognize that the proportion of aged persons in our population is growing; we tend to assume that a smaller number of working age are going to have to maintain the rate of production of the country, (and increase it since we are always striving for a higher standard of living), and at the same time finance through their efforts any provision for the aged. One of the solutions for this problem is full employment for those of working age, combined with a definite policy of raising the upper limit of the working age group, so that to as large an extent as possible the financial security of the so-called

aged comes from their own ability to support themselves through continued employment.

Eventually the time comes when the old person can no longer work, and he still needs financial security. The longer he has worked, the shorter the remaining years for which he has to provide; and the greater the possibility that, after the period when his children were young and his expenses heavy, he has been able to accumulate something for his old age. Any system of old age pensions that discourages savings, as does the present system in Canada, is a short-sighted policy. Why should a man pay an insurance premium for twenty years in order to obtain an annuity of \$40 a month, when by so doing, he prevents himself from getting an old age pension. The recommendation of the Joint Senate-House of Commons Committee for a universal pension will, if it is implemented, give each person the feeling of a minimum degree of security, upon which he will be encouraged to build, if he desires more than a minimum standard of living in his old age.

The old person also needs recreation. In this, as in other things, the old are individuals. One person wants to practise his hobbies and the amusements that he has always enjoyed and in which he does well: another wants an opportunity to study something that he has never before had time to do; sometimes it is the songs and dances familiar fifty years ago; sometimes it is a discussion of current politics. Why should age be considered a time for folded hands and meditation? Why should the recreational interests of the aged be less varied, even if they are less strenuous, than those of the young? Perhaps again we are inclined to assume that the aged need no recreation, that they are really only waiting for death, and that death is a serious business. Perhaps it will require a revolution in our own thinking to help the aged enjoy the period they spend in the waiting room.

We expect the aged to sit and wait quietly for death,—another reflection of our culture. This is the role we have given old people, a product to a large extent of the time when life consisted of working, eating and sleeping. Now leisure and play have become a fundamental part of our concept of living, and we are slowly realizing that this is not a desire limited to youth. In a few places clubs are developing for the older folk, some through their own initiative, some sponsored by community groups. There is need for much more of this sort of organization, but again we must remember that old people want to participate, and not just be entertained.

Finally, the old have problems with the solution of which they need the help of social workers. Some of the problems relate to the material needs we have been discussing; others are less tangible, equally real and important, emotional problems. Age is a time of upsurging of all the unsolved problems of the past: fears and anxieties, conflicts and frustrations, relationships with people; present difficulties magnified by the lack of release through physical activity, and the cutting off of various means of "escape", people faced with innumerable situations with which they need help, yet with less ability to help themselves. Social service organizations have to a large extent ignored the need of the aged for case work service; yet their problems are at least as great as those of other groups.

Who are the aged? They are individuals, each with his own personality, his own abilities, his own desires. What are the needs of the aged? Essentially the same as the needs of other people, but complicated by the waning abilities of the aged to find their own solution. Our attitudes to the aged, our limited provision for their needs, are the product of a culture that has failed to keep step with a changing society. Attitudes change slowly, and in the meantime, the aged among us suffer.
