

# Chapter 25

## Chronic Mental Illness in Old Age Homes: An International Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

*Aging is a part of natural developmental process in the life of any living being. For human beings it is not just a biological phenomenon but it has psychological and social implications too. Some of the areas that would be affected include those related to health and health care, family composition, living arrangement, housing and migration. As a result of these socio-demographic evolutions and situations, older adults at times are forced to shift from their own homes to institutions/ Old age homes OAH. Living in OAH evokes a picture of apathy, dependence, and sadness which make the older adults increasingly vulnerable to mental health problems. Further there is also a strong need to develop suitable strategies to implement better mental health programmes and guidelines for the CMI in old age homes.*

### INTRODUCTION

*This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.*  
(Winston. S. Churchill)

Aging can generally be described as the process of growing old and is an intricate part of the life cycle. As Shakespeare had put, “Old age is last scene of all that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.” Basically it is a multi-dimensional process and affects almost every aspect of human life. Old age means reduced physical ability, declining mental ability, the gradual giving up of role playing in socio-economic activities, and a shift in economic status moving from economic independence to economic dependence upon others

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for support. Old age is called “dark” not because the light fails to shine but because people refuse to see it (Gowri, 2003). Aging is a part of natural developmental process in the life of any living being. For human beings it is not just a biological phenomenon but it has psychological and social implications too. With improved economic status and health care facilities, the number of people living beyond age 60 years is rapidly increasing. Various authors define old age starting between 55 to 65 years age in different countries and cultures. However, most of the authors agree upon 65 years and above age as cut off for defining old age (Kinsella & Phillips, 2005). For various welfare issues individuals above age 60 years are considered to be in old age in India (Zachariah, Mathew, & Irudaya, 2000). In developing countries majority of older people still live in rural areas where they are much respected as a wise family member. However, the situation is much changing due to industrialization leading to more migration and disintegration of joint families. With changing economy, social values and support system has also considerably changed. In the traditional societies elderly were highly respected as family members and source of wisdom. But the younger generation now considers elderly people largely unwanted. The elderly people occupy economically lower social status and economically weaker, However, they are less receptive to accept the natural process of growing weaker (Pesic, 2007). Biologically too, old age is characterized by disease disability and dependency. With such vulnerabilities and changing social structure and values, the generation gap is widening and problems of old age are becoming difficult to manage.

## **Definition of Aging**

Although everyone is familiar with aging, defining aging is not a so straight forward. Aging can simply refer to the passage of time and can even have a positive connotation as in “aging wine”. For example, Rose (1991) in his seminal book on the evolution of aging defines aging as “a persistent decline in the age-specific fitness components of an organism due to internal physiological degeneration.” From my point of view, such a definition of aging is certainly not wrong, but one might say that it is not sufficiently precise.

The aging process is of course a biological reality which has its own dynamic, largely beyond human control. However, it is also subject to the constructions by which each society makes sense of old age. In the developed world, chronological time plays a paramount role. The age of 60 or 65, roughly equivalent to retirement ages in most developed countries is said to be the beginning of old age. In many parts of the developing world, chronological time has little or no importance in the meaning of old age. Other socially constructed meanings of age are more significant such as the roles assigned to older people; in some cases, it is the loss of roles accompanying physical decline which is significant in defining old age. Thus, in contrast to the chronological milestones which mark life stages in the developed world, old age in many developing countries is seen to begin at the point when active contribution is no longer possible” (Gorman, 1999).

Age classification varied between countries and over time, reflecting in many instances the social class differences or functional ability related to the workforce, but more often than not was a reflection of the current political and economic situation. Many times the definition is linked to the retirement age, which in some instances, was lower for women than men. This transition in livelihood became the basis for the definition of old age which occurred between the ages of 45 and 55 years for women and between the ages of 55 and 75 years for men (Thane, 1978). To sum it up, aging is a complex process composed of several features:

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