

Family support for older people: determinants and consequences (FAMSUP)

an ESF Scientific Network

There is little dispute that with growing numbers of very old people in most industrialised countries, there are more needing support than ever before, either from their families or from public services. It is also clear that demographic and family behavioural patterns are changing, with more women going out to work, and more people remaining childless. Many believe that these changes within families are reducing the support very elderly people have traditionally received just as the numbers needing it are increasing.

The obvious consequence of this would be a growing demand for the provision of formal services, increasing public expenditure and quite probably reducing the quality of life of some disabled elderly people. But such pessimism is not universally shared, and there is considerable uncertainty over how family care for elderly people will evolve in the future. This makes the need for research on this topic all the more pressing, to help resolve the uncertainties and determine future policy priorities. Indeed the European Union has identified “demographic and social policy aspects of population ageing” as well as “social care services to elderly people” as priority areas for research. This Network is making a major contribution to such research by adding value to existing national programmes through collaboration and exchange of ideas, as well as linking up with researchers in the USA, Canada and Japan. In particular the Network is exploiting Europe’s “natural laboratory”, namely the great variations between member countries in the balance between family and formal care for elderly people.

One reason for continuing uncertainty over the future provision of care for very elderly people is that the outcomes of particular types of support are still poorly understood, with apparent contradictions between different research findings.

Questions that need answering include the effect of living alone on well-being in different cultural contexts and whether the provision of more formal help discourages or supports family care. There is also the question of whether convergence of social policies within the EU will promote greater similarity in provision of care both by families and public services, and if so what the implications will be in each member country. Currently there is considerable divergence between the levels of support in different countries, resulting from varying family and social policy patterns. In general northern Europe provides more extensive public services, while in southern Europe there is a greater level of family support. However there are already signs of some narrowing of the “north/south divide”. For example in several northern European countries, including the UK, Sweden and the

Netherlands, recent government policies have reduced admission to long-care institutions, with corresponding increased reliance on family support. Conversely some southern European countries, such as Greece, have recognised the need to expand public provision of support for very frail elderly people.

In some other countries, such as Austria, high levels of co-residence have persisted and there appears to be strong family support for very elderly or frail people as well as comprehensive formal care. This approach may prove the most flexible and cost effective in the long term, but further study is needed to confirm or refute this suggestion.

To obtain the required understanding of how different approaches affect the quality of life of elderly people as well as the implications for public expenditure, this Network has adopted a comparative approach to unravel the relationship between socio-demographic, cultural, policy factors, and family support. It will also take into account variations between the health of the different elderly populations under study.

The Network’s specific objectives are to:

- Examine the effect of demographic and family patterns (e.g. divorce, average age at childbearing, family size, and non-marital childbearing) on the likelihood of co-residence with an elderly parent and the provision of care.
- Examine the effect of women’s employment on the likelihood of co-residence with an elderly parent and the provision of care, distinguishing between co-resident and extra resident care.
- Investigate the relationship between material resources and the living arrangements of older people.
- Analyse associations between living arrangements, especially living alone, and the health and well being of older people in different countries.
- Examine interactions between the provision of family care and long term care policies.
- Discuss and disseminate implications for policy.

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