
2 Information for Elderly People Moving into Residential Care: The Views of Elderly People Living in the Community

This account is based on the views of a total of 31 elderly people attending five day centres. 15 of the participants took part in group discussions, 16 of them were interviewed individually. Three of the day centres provided services mainly for elderly people from ethnic communities.

The interviews and discussions explored how people got information about the day centres and other services for people in the community; their use of various information sources and preferred methods of receiving information; their access to information about residential care and attitudes to it. By asking these questions we intended to gain further understanding of the ways in which elderly people receive and seek information, particularly their attitudes to information about residential care.

Information about the day centres

Friends, families and informal contacts had been most influential in getting people to start using the day centre. Knowing people who already attended was the usual reason for starting to go to the day centre. None of those interviewed had actually tried to find out about day centre facilities. In a few cases the Minister at the church to which one of the day centres was attached had mentioned it to people, or a social worker or other professional with whom they were already in contact had suggested it. Only two people mentioned printed information as playing a part in their attendance - one had been given a leaflet by the Minister, the other one's daughter had seen a poster.

Information about residential care

The pattern that emerges is one of people knowing very little about residential care or of how to find out about it. They hope the need will not arise but should it become necessary to find information they will continue to use the contacts in the community and the neighbourhood who have been helpful in the past, albeit on different issues. Thus, most people are reliant on known professionals and informal advisors as sources of information and a way into 'the system'.

Only one of the participants said that she had any contact with residential care. Her husband had been very ill and had gone into a residential home for a short period.

The attitude of most of the participants was that they did not want to have anything to do with residential care, or to know anything about it, until it was necessary to do so.

They hoped it never would be necessary. None of them had ever needed to find information about residential care:

I don't need to know about residential care yet!

I don't think I need to know about it yet.

I don't know anything about residential care. I'd say think twice, maybe three times, about giving up your home.

All I hope is, I'm called. You don't like to give up your own home. If the time comes.....I don't think about it.

Should the time come when they needed to find out about residential care, or if they needed to help someone else find out, most people would turn to the sources of information which they had used in the past for other questions. These were people and organisations with which they were familiar and in which they had confidence. For most of them this was the staff at the day centre or the Minister at the church. They were confident that these people would be helpful and would know where to go for information:

We would come to the office here and get the project worker to help us.

If I needed to find out any information about sheltered or residential homes or anything like that I would ask ____ or ____ [staff at the centre] because they would know, or if they didn't they would find out for me.

A few people said they would go to the social services department for help, but this suggestion came from those who already had contacts with social workers for other family matters or who remembered someone from the department coming to talk to a group at the day centre about the services that were available:

I would go back to the social worker I had when my husband was ill.

People came here from the social services - they told us that if we were ever ill and wanted to go in a home, then we could go.

Two people mentioned that they would go to their GP and several mentioned that they would ask their children. Several people had previously used local advice centres and felt they would go back with any further queries, because they had been helpful on previous occasions:

I'd go to the Citizens Advice Bureau. When my husband died, I was on a pension and I went to see them and they got me more. Also, someone I know wanted to make a will - they were very helpful.

I would tell them to go to the CAB. There's also a little neighbourhood advice centre in ____ and I go there with my tax problems.

I'd say go to the Age Concern - they're very good, help you a lot. I'm OK with my contacts - my club helps a bit where I go on Friday.

A number of people did not know where they would go to or how they would start looking for information:

I don't know - I get no help from social services and I have no-one at home to help me. I don't know what I'd do.

Actually I wouldn't know where to start - unless I went to my doctor or something like that.

I don't know - if I was really handicapped I would surely find someone to help me.

I really don't know because I'm not interested at the present time. If the time came it would be a different matter.

I'd tell them they'd have to go and find out for themselves because we haven't got any experience.

Providing information about services to elderly people

People had a wide range of views about the best ways of informing elderly people about services. In general these reflected their own experience and information networks. Some people, who said they had never needed any services, said they did not know who they would ask for help. Some felt that day centres were the answer:

They should all have access to centres like this. They need someone who has time for them and who can really talk to them. The people who help must be able to speak their language. After the centre is set up, it's word of mouth.

Asking friends was thought to be a very important way of getting information. The social services department was mentioned several times, but it might be better if the social services staff came to the enquirer, rather than the other way round:

If they have a home help or anyone coming from the social services, like a social worker, you could ask them.

Through the social services - they might visit them in their homes.

However, there are seen to be certain disadvantages to this:

Go to social services - the trouble is they want to know all your business. You fill in all the forms - you get nothing.

Advice centres were seen as useful sources of help by those who had used them before:

I might go to my MP - he has an advice service in _____. I've been to see him twice before. It was about housing.

If you are foreign and you want to know something, go to places like advice centres and they put you in the right way. Some people are a bit stubborn - don't like going to these places - but if you don't go and ask, you don't know.

Printed information, leaflets and publicity were not at all popular. Most people had received various kinds of printed information about services and entitlements in the past, but few had found it useful. The reasons for this were that the information was difficult to understand; it was not applicable to the individual's actual circumstances; it led you to expect you get something when you could not; it does not help services

to be delivered efficiently, which is the real problem; it still require there to be someone with whom to discuss the problem with.

I don't read them. They're too difficult to understand, and they ask too many questions - it's over and over the same thing. They say you've got a lot of money you can claim, but when you go there you can't get anything.

Printed information is not the point. People in departments need to speed up the action. It takes too long to get through things -they all need speeding up.

Lots come through the letterbox, but I can't understand them - the language is too complicated.

I've received them sometimes in the post, or got them from the rent office or somewhere. If I had a special need I would see _____ [staff at day centre]. Leaflets are useless unless you have a special need - no good for general advice.

Key issues

Patterns of information-seeking

The elderly people involved in this exercise made very little use of formal sources of information and advice and had scant or no knowledge of such sources. They relied heavily on a limited range of advisers, formal and informal, and professionals, with whom they had come into contact by various means. It appears that they would be unlikely to approach any organisation they did not know with a request for information, unless this had been suggested to them by someone else with knowledge of it.

It is essential, in such circumstances, that the advisers and contacts are themselves well informed. It is unlikely to be practical for them all to be fully informed about the range of services available, but they must have a sound knowledge of the relevant sources of information. Such sources must be readily available and accessible to them.

Attitudes to residential care

The reluctance to think about residential care is a major obstacle to any attempt to persuade people to seek information about it or to consider options at an earlier stage in their lives.

Printed information

Printed information is very unpopular, yet many local authorities and other agencies rely quite heavily on it to alert people to services and entitlements. The limited evidence here suggests that if printed information is to be used it must be very clear and simple and should be targeted to specific circumstances. It must also be backed up by access to a personal adviser. General information about services, widely distributed, is probably the least effective way of using printed communication.