



Editorial

Informal (family) caregivers – irreplaceable but undervalued

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At present, the ageing of the population is an essential demographic trend. According to statistical predictions, in 2050, a third of Czech society will be over 65 (Czech Statistical Office, 2023), which will lead to a tremendous burden on the health and social service system. Health and social service providers are already struggling with a shortage of doctors, nurses, and social workers. I am convinced that supporting home care is the key to the increasing need for long-term care. The term home care includes home health services, outreach social services, nursing services, personal assistance, respite care, and lay care provided by a loved one. Formal caregivers provide home care; these multidisciplinary teams of doctors, nurses, and social workers provide health and outreach social services in the patient's home environment, primarily through home care agencies. Currently, the importance of informal caregivers is continually highlighted. As a rule, a family member without specific professional training provides care to a loved one without financial compensation, and care is carried out with familiar kindness, personal interest, and emotional involvement. Unlike formal caregivers, who are part of an organized health and social system, informal (family) caregivers tend to work without sufficient support and recognition. This often leads to physical/mental exhaustion and social exclusion. Supporting family caregivers' quality of life and healthy lifestyle requires a comprehensive, continuous, and multidisciplinary approach, i.e., cooperation between state administration, local government, the non-profit sector, and educational institutions.

Unlike many European countries, the Czech Republic has not yet systematically and comprehensively developed strategic documents regarding the support and development of informal care. There is no accurate number of informal caregivers in individual regions or at the national level, nor is there a system or method of reporting informal care. To ensure the systematic provision of informal care, it is necessary to define the legal and financial framework of informal care, expand the range of educational programs for informal caregivers, and, finally, use modern technologies in caring for patients in the home environment.

A crucial issue for informal caregivers is their economic security and the combination of care and employment. Informal caregivers caring for seniors and people with dementia, as well as mothers caring for children with disabilities, are predominantly of working age. In recent years, financial support for caregivers has become a societal issue due to the high inflation rate. The poor economic situation of caring families has been highlighted by, among others, the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (National Register of Healthcare Professionals CZ, 2023). The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs responded to this unfortunate situation by amending the Act on Social Services, which legislatively defined the target group of caregivers and increased contributions for providing care to a loved one (Act No. 164/2024 Coll.). As a benefit of the Czech health insurance system, long-term care allowance is also an excellent step towards supporting informal care. However, practice shows that informal caregivers are not informed about this benefit, and the employer does not have to agree to the drawing of long-term care allowance.

Another option for financial security for informal caregivers is the social wage, which informal caregivers would be entitled to in the event of continuous care for a dependent person. It would be a legislatively guaranteed benefit ensuring the basic living expenses of informal caregivers. However, this method of economic security for informal caregivers is not yet anchored in the Czech legal system.

In recent years, modern technologies have been increasingly used in social work and health services. The technological platform includes various applications, digital tools, and educational techniques. It is assumed that artificial intelligence will become necessary when working with patients in the home environment. We are on the threshold of the digital transformation of the health and social care system.

Increasing societal awareness of the role and importance of informal caregivers is crucial to improve their status and conditions. This can be achieved through public educational campaigns that focus on increasing the prestige of informal care. Given the long-term interest in informal care, the Faculty

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of Health and Social Sciences of the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice is one of the important educators of informal caregivers in South Bohemia. Other target education groups include professional caregivers (general nurses, social workers, health and social workers), who can use the lifelong learning courses offered by the faculty (University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, 2021). In the case of the needs of workers from the helping professions, “tailor-made” educational courses can be prepared for informal and formal caregivers.

Home care is irreplaceable and undervalued. So, let's try to change the system of care for our loved ones and increase the prestige of informal care.

“Let's never doubt that a small group of aware and enthusiastic people cannot change our tiny world. It is the only possible way to change,” as the well-known cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead said.

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