Aging China: The Demographic Challenge to China’s Economic Prospects

By Robert Stowe England


The growth of the elderly population (aged 65 and over) during the next two decades is projected to be faster in Asian countries, with an annual growth rate of 3–3.3%, than in developed countries (1.7%). The ageing in Asia is particularly dramatic for China: between 2000 and 2050, the proportion of people aged 65 and older will rise from 7% to 23%, numbering more than 332 million in 2050 in China, far greater than the combined elderly populations of North America, Europe and Japan. This book tries to capture the significant economic, market, social and demographic factors that will shape the future of China and the role that ageing will play in the mix of influences. While the author acknowledges the complexity of China as one country, two systems (rural, urban), but four societies (farming, manufacturing, services, knowledge), and the difficulty of getting accurate statistical data in China, he endeavours to probe into the interaction of socio-economic changes with ageing in China: the movement from a command to market economy, rural-to-urban migration, extended to nuclear family, imbalance arising from one-child policy, the change from a pyramid to an upside-down pyramid age structure, and a rising elderly dependency ratio. Ageing is seen negatively as a ‘burden’ and ‘challenge’ in this book. Will the destiny of China be shaped by demographics alone, as suggested by the author? In the Chinese culture, longevity is something to be treasured and celebrated. The Chinese character for ‘longevity’ symbolises the younger generation offering their produce to the older generation, an indication of intergenerational harmony rather than tension. Someone interested in the economic aspects of ageing in China would enjoy this book, but it throws more uncertainties and questions than answers.

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Essential Facts in Geriatric Medicine

By C. Bracewell, R. Gray and G. S. Rai


This book is based on the syllabus for the written examination for the Diploma in Geriatric Medicine developed by the Royal College of Physicians. The diploma, and therefore presumably the book, is designed for general practitioners (GPs) with a special interest in the elderly, and junior doctors/non-consultant grades. GPs reading it will notice the absence of their role in primary care—not listed as part of the team caring for disabled older people at home (or district nurses, the mainstay of the service) and reference to the now entirely obsolete 1990 contract. It is the view from secondary care. It is divided into four parts with the smallest part being on the demography and social aspects of ageing, and the main two parts being on clinical aspects of old age (such as palliative care) and clinical problems encountered in old age (such as leg ulcers). The last part is on social services, audit and money.

Most of the book reads like a syllabus, although the style varies in some chapters. It is very clearly set out with lists of bullet points. The authors have gone for clarity and authority with a few (mostly web-based) references at the end of each chapter. They do not discuss contentious areas or cite alternative views. This is not a book that a GP or junior doctor would turn to for help with the clinical management of problems in old age (is it better to keep dementing diabetes’ blood sugars a bit higher or risk the hypoglycaemia?) or for reflections on ethical conundrums (such as why do managers of residential homes expect to know the medical details of potential residents?). It is what it says on the packet—essential facts, to get you through an exam.

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Psychogeriatric Service Delivery; An International Perspective

Draper, Melding and Brodaty


Evaluating Mental Health Services for Older People

Jennifer Finch


These two books address similar themes in different ways. Both deal with trying to explain the rather haphazard way services for older people have developed across the globe. Indeed, their development has been at best slow and in some
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places non-existent. Given that many countries’ demographics are heavily tilting towards the elderly and that older people now make up more than half our hospital population, it has become essential that we plan for their needs.

Jenny Finch’s book is a fairly comprehensive review of mental health services for older people in this country, the USA, Canada, Australia and to a lesser extent Europe. One of the strengths of the book is that she nicely brings in the political landmarks and explains them without an excess of jargon. Her main thrust though is the evaluation of such services. As she says, ‘the services currently offered are patchy’, hence the need to evaluate them. The book illustrates many approaches to this; it is a practical tool for managers and planners.

‘Evaluating Mental Health Services for Older People’ is well set out and the opening chapters are very readable. As Finch concentrates more on the validation of services, there is a need for explaining statistical approaches and this can never be described as a joy to read. Finch has done an admirable job though, but this remains a reference book.

‘Psychogeriatric Service Delivery; An International Perspective’ is a collection of essays covering an array of international experts in the field. It is structured in three main parts. The first looks at the theory of old age mental health services, ranging from its history to service planning and economics. The second describes current practice across the globe. The third looks at examples of best practice and ways of tackling the problems of the future.

Draper et al.’s book has a number of strengths. First, it is a comprehensive review of services across the globe, it does not ignore the less developed countries and it tries to be all encompassing. Second, the essays are largely well written and readable. For example, I am pleased to report such things as a paragraph quote from ‘Alice in Wonderland’. I did not expect to enjoy reading the book, but I did. Thirdly, some of the ideas raised are really quite practical, e.g. ‘Psychogeriatric service delivery with limited resources’, and illustrate ideas from workers in the field. On the downside, the layout of the book is dull and Finch’s book is easier to reference things.

In conclusion, I like both books. It is wrong to compare them directly because they have different aims. Finch’s book is a good practical guide that concentrates on explaining how to evaluate services. Draper et al.’s is a review of theory and current practice that allows many ideas and approaches to be aired; it is my favourite of the two mainly because it is genuinely thought provoking.

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