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Placing seniors at the center of concerns

For more than thirty years, scientists who are interested in aging have been trying to convince decision-makers of the importance of taking a major turn to build a society that takes into account the aging of its population. The demographic revolution calls for transformative actions. Seniors support this analysis because they know the challenges they face but society is slow to create the conditions necessary to create and maintain inclusive living conditions for seniors. It is true that such actions, daring or even revolutionary, require a strong will and political courage on the part of our decision-makers.

Putting seniors back at the center of concerns is first of all recognizing diversity in the trajectories of aging: a healthy octogenarian does not have the needs of a septuagenarian living with an advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease. Recognizing this diversity is necessary to avoid labels, ageism and the stigma it entails.

Listening to what older people have to say about their priorities and aspirations should be part of the solution and may surprise many. For example, research has shown that older adults are less concerned with life-threatening illnesses than with health problems that affect their independence, social participation and quality of life, such as memory problems or sensory loss. They have told us so many times during these pandemic times: think about our quality of life, and make us part of the conversation.

Long-term care

Admittedly, the current model of long-term care will have to be thoroughly transformed: improving the working conditions of beneficiary attendants and other health professionals, rethinking the physical environments which are often dilapidated and ill-adapted, creating new places such as Homes seniors (maison des aînés), who are welcoming and make you want to live and work there.

It is also necessary to establish conditions that promote cognitive and mental health and that allow people to get out of their environment so that they remain anchored in society. Why are the people who live in CHSLDs not more in public circles, at the museum, on the sidewalks? Just as we are now seeing more and more people with physical disabilities taking possession of public places in safe conditions, this should also be the case for very old people even when they have significant disabilities. Knowing and recognizing better also helps to destigmatize and reduce the fear that these conditions create.
Research and innovation
The societal reflection that is starting must not be limited to long-term accommodation structures. It is just as vital to act upstream, that is to say before people find themselves there. The majority of Quebecers over 65 live in their homes and wish to stay there as long as possible. Aging at home might seem simple, while the challenges are important because the health conditions that limit autonomy accumulate with age. Approaches must be developed to detect these conditions that put seniors at risk and respond effectively to them.

In this context, research and innovation must be part of the solution. Quebec prides itself on being an innovative society, and it is time to put these innovations at the service of seniors and those who support them. Health research is increasingly integrating seniors and caregivers to define and achieve its knowledge development objectives aimed at improving practices. Researchers must also be heard by decision-making bodies.

As researchers in geriatrics and gerontology, we are challenged as to our role in this pandemic and how we could have contributed. Some of the innovations that we develop are slow to cross the limits of laboratories. Yet they could have made a difference. For example, innovations in digital health could have helped to identify people at risk from a distance, reduce the distress of confined seniors or administer preventive interventions that promote physical, psychological and cognitive health. The pandemic made it possible to disseminate innovations that were previously marginal such as telehealth and family meetings by electronic tablet. Why not equip all seniors with an internet connection and the latest digital technologies if this allows them to be better looked after, and to stay active and connected to the world? Why not equip all caregivers with telehealth solutions?

In summary, inclusion and support older adults must take into account the opportunities and challenges of aging, the needs of older adults, and the technological advancements that emanate from our laboratories. The ultimate goal is to ensure that society is inclusive of older adults, benefits from their experience while supporting their health and well-being.