

## **The Problem of Ageism and Potential Solutions in our Healthcare System**

The problem of ageism is not a new one, yet we still fail to acknowledge, discuss, and address its role in our society, specifically in our healthcare system. Ageism is so pertinent to society because it is one of “the most institutionalized forms of prejudice” present.<sup>1</sup> Therefore it is not only necessary to identify the role and effects of ageism within our healthcare system, but also barriers to reducing this influence and potential solutions.

Ageism can affect patients in our healthcare system in a myriad of negative ways. These include increased health disparities, less treatment, and negative social stereotypes. Ageism can negatively impact the quality of life and the quality of care delivery in various healthcare settings. However, it is often hard to identify the effects of ageism because of the lack of operationalized definitions and examples.<sup>2</sup> One of the most challenging aspects of ageism is that it is often implicit rather than explicit, meaning it may not be consciously acknowledged and is more subtle. In this way, it is challenging to identify and combat instances of ageism in everyday practice. Other barriers include a general lack of research on ageism, especially ageism as it relates to older patients in our healthcare system.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these barriers, there are many tactics, approaches, and solutions to address ageism and the negative consequences of prejudice within the healthcare field. While the research is still fairly limited, one of the most important ways to combat ageism is through education. By increasing awareness and conversations on ageism, we can begin to identify these implicit biases and subconscious stereotypes – the first step towards dismantling ageism.<sup>4</sup> Concrete interventions and policies – especially in the healthcare field – are important to create accountability and standards for practice. While this is still difficult because of the lack of operationalized definitions, advocating for ageism awareness is an important step in starting the

conversation towards legislation and intervention.<sup>4</sup> These conversations should happen at an everyday level, with our families, friends, and coworkers no matter in the healthcare field or not. Educating society as a whole about the myths of aging is an important part of shifting away from negative stereotypes.<sup>1</sup>

For the healthcare field specifically, these same ideas can be utilized. Education of healthcare professionals is one of the simplest, most cost-effective and results-oriented strategies to address ageism within healthcare. Addressing myths and stereotypes about age in the didactic education and training of physicians, psychologists, and health care professionals is a direct way of acknowledging ageism within the system and promoting discussion of solutions.<sup>1</sup> In one study, a 1-hour video-based intervention was presented to a group of health care professional participants. Pre and post surveys demonstrated that not only did their internalized aging anxiety decrease, but also their ageist behaviors exhibited in practice.<sup>3</sup> In another study of health care students, a 7-part approach was utilized as part of the curriculum to dispel unfounded myths about aging. 71% of the students reported that their attitudes toward older adults were improved after the implementation of this curricula. Some of the most effective components included community-based education programs, role-playing, and emphasizing contextual approaches to healthcare.<sup>5</sup> Education, training, and intervention videos are relatively straightforward solutions to a problem with massive consequences – we must be willing to prioritize these solutions in order to mitigate these negative consequences of ageism in our healthcare system.

In order eradicate ageism in health care, we must first acknowledge it exists. Discussing its role in the healthcare system and identifying barriers to solutions is an important start. Further, we need to embrace and implement solutions such as education, training, reflection, and context in order to work towards a less ageist healthcare field.

## References:

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