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## Original Article

# Volunteers as caregivers for elderly with chronic diseases: An assessment of demand and cause of demand



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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** We sought to examine the demand of volunteers on long-term care of elderly patients with chronic diseases. Further, we evaluated patients' reasons to want long-term care volunteers as well as socioeconomic factors affecting these needs.

**Methods:** Questionnaires were distributed to 516 elderly with chronic diseases from nursing homes, hospitals, and elderly living with relatives. Patient questions dealt with basic socioeconomic questions, their reasons to want care volunteers, and the nature of chronic disease, and their motivation to volunteer and which sorts of activities they perform while volunteering.

**Results:** 73.4% of the elderly patients with chronic diseases desired to have volunteers for long-term care. The most desired services were care visits, transportation, and leisure/recreation activities. The number of chronic diseases they had, their marital status, education level, and social support system were all statistically important.

**Conclusion:** The data presented here suggest that the government should actively advocate for volunteer service for elderly with chronic diseases. Additional support is needed in terms of financial support, incentive measures, professional training for volunteers, and supervision of volunteers. Such developments are needed to improve volunteer service standards.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2013, the percentage of people aged 60 or over in China accounted for 14.9% of the population, equaling 202.4 million

people [1]. The country's age structure correlated with the incidence of disease, with chronic diseases as the primary threat [2,3]. The number of people with chronic disease is increasing rapidly and is caused by slow recovery and complications [2]. According to China's sixth census, disabled

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elderly account for 19% of the country's aged population ( $\geq 60$  years old), 40 million people in 2015 [4]. Adequate long-term care for the elderly is imperative.

The World Health Organization defines long-term care as care given by informal caregivers (family, friends, and neighbors) or professionals (health and social service), to “ensure that the people who do not have self-care ability can continue to get their personal likes and higher quality of life, to obtain the greatest possible degree of independence, autonomy, participation, personal satisfaction and personality dignity.” [5] Many elderly patients with chronic diseases do not have sufficient long-term care due to such a large demand. The demand for care providers is expected to exceed 5 million people in 2015 [6]. The demand is partially driven by economic disparity, shrinking family sizes, and traditional belief systems. Volunteers are critical resources for long-term care. The volunteer system is in dire need of improvement, but limited research has been performed to determine how to develop the system. We therefore recruited elderly patients with chronic diseases and their volunteer caregivers. Participants filled out questionnaires containing questions about their attitudes, needs, and expectations of long-term care volunteers. Such information should provide us with the basis for how to foster long-term care volunteers to meet the requirements of elderly with chronic diseases.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Subjects

We employed the convenience sampling method and recruited 516 elderly with chronic disease. Participants lived in nursing homes, hospitals, and or with relatives. Inclusion criteria were: over 60 years of age, permanent residents in the city, suffered from one or more chronic disease (diagnosed by a doctor), conscious, no mental disability, and willing to participate in the study.

### 2.2. Questionnaires

Questionnaires contains two parts: ① elderly patients with chronic diseases situation questionnaire, which contains general information such as age, gender, condition of chronic disease, marital status, education level, inhabiting information, nature of the housing, medical insurance, the main economic source, average monthly income, religious belief, Activities of Daily Living Scale (ADL), Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS). ② elderly patients with chronic diseases in the choice of long-term care volunteers will and the content of the volunteer service. Through literature analysis, group discussion and interview method to design problem, elderly patients with chronic diseases in the choice of long-term care volunteers will and the content of the volunteer service.

### 2.3. Questionnaire distribution

All investigators (graduate and undergraduate students) who distributed questionnaires were instructed in a unified

manner before recruiting participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. For those physically unable to fill out the survey, questions and possible answers were read and explained to them, and the investigator recorded their oral answers.

### 2.4. Statistics

All questionnaire responses were recorded in Epidata 3.1 [12], and data were analyzed in SPSS version 17 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) statistical software. We performed  $\chi^2$  tests, variance analyses, and descriptive statistics.  $p < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Participant characteristics

We included 516 elderly with chronic diseases in this study. Elderly ages ranged from 60 to 97 years old, and the average age was  $76.38 \pm 4.47$  years. 46.5% were male and 53.5% were female. For a complete list of participant characteristics, see Table 1.

### 3.2. Elderly's desire to have long-term care volunteers

We first sought to determine whether elderly with chronic diseases wished to have volunteer services. We found that 73.4% of participants wished to have volunteers to help care for them. We then asked which types of services they desired most. The top three responses were care visits, transportation, and leisure/recreation (Fig. 1).

### 3.3. Factors affecting elderly's desire to have long-term care volunteers

We performed a single factor analysis to determine which factors affected whether the elderly would accept volunteer services. All factors tested here were found to be significant, including age, type of chronic disease, marital status, education level, living situation (alone, with relatives, etc.), type of the housing, medical insurance, and ADL level (Table 1).

### 3.4. Factors influencing elderly's desire to have long-term care volunteers

Lastly, we performed a logistic regression analysis to determine which factors influence the participants' desires to get long-term care volunteers. We found that the number of chronic diseases they had, their marital status, education level, and social support system were significantly important (Table 2). Age, medical insurance, nature of housing, and ADL level were not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ).

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