



Social welfare utilization and needs of older adults in Taiwan: Survey research

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ABSTRACT

Background: The demand for long-term care for older adults has escalated sharply. A good policy dedicated to the welfare of older adults has improved their quality of life. The purpose of this study was to explore the social welfare utilization and needs of older adults and compare their differences among age groups, genders, and functional dependency levels.

Methods: Three hundred eighty-four stratified, random-sampled Taiwanese community-dwelling older adults were recruited for this survey research. Participants rated their utilization of and needs for the 30 social welfare services provided by the government on a Likert-type scale.

Results: The most widely used and needed social welfare services by the older adults were senior monetary stipend and a subsidy for the national health insurance premium. Young-old, male, and functionally independent older adults had more knowledge of the social welfare services than their counterparts.

Conclusions: While designing a comprehensive social welfare system, differing needs of different age groups, genders, and functional dependency levels should be taken into consideration.

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Introduction

Rapid population aging is a global phenomenon; it has become an issue of growing concern across countries (Harper, 2006; United Nations, 2008). A longer life expectancy, accompanied by rapid increases in the rates of chronic diseases and the changes in family structure, have made long-term care for older adults an urgent issue for government and society. Understanding the

needs of older adults would be the foundation for successful long-term care and social welfare policy making.

According to a United Nations report (2008), by the year 2000, the elderly global population had reached 600 million, accounting for 10% of the total population, and it was estimated to increase to 2 billion by 2050, comprising up to 21% of the total population. The elderly population is expected to quadruple in size from the year 2000 to 2050; those aged 80 and over would nearly quintuple. Therefore, the government of

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the United States has paid close attention to the welfare policy for older adults since the late 20th century (Parrott, Reynolds, & Bengtson, 1997; Yue, 1997). Moreover, the United Kingdom also has begun to examine the welfare of older adults (Corden, 1999; Costigan, Finch, Beverley, Legard, & Ritchie, 1999).

Similarly, by the definition of the World Health Organization, Taiwan has been an aging society since 1993. As the population keeps growing older, persons 65 years of age or older increased from 7.09% of the total population in 1993 to 11.12% in 2012 (Ministry of the Interior, 2012a), and it is estimated by the Council for Economic Planning and Development (2002) that it will reach 20.10% in 2014 and 39.40% in 2060. The government of Taiwan has implemented the National Health Insurance program since 1995 to meet the medical care needs of people of all ages in Taiwan (Bureau of National Health Insurance, 1995). However, the program only covered acute hospital care and clinical visits. As people aged, medical care was no longer the only need of older adults; the long-term care and social welfare needs received growing attention.

For the past decade, the government of Taiwan has been dedicated to designing the welfare services programs for older adults. The government approved the project “A Pilot Program for the Development of Long-Term Care System” in the year 2000, “Plan for the Development of the Care-Services Welfare and Industry” in 2002, and “Long-Term Care Ten-year Plan” in 2007 (Ministry of the Interior, 2012b). These pilot projects were designed by the experts, directed by the government, and specifically aimed to serve the population in four categories: (a) people who are 65 years and over, (b) aborigines who are 55 years and over, (c) those with disabilities who are 50 years old and over, and (d) older adults who live alone. Various services are provided through these projects, such as home care, day care, meals on wheels, and transportation services (Ministry of the Interior, 2012b). For the past couple of years, the government has added several social welfare services, and a total of 30 social welfare services are currently provided, such as senior living allowance, home nutrition, home rehabilitation, senior activity and leisure, and supportive residential home (Social Affairs Bureau of Kaohsiung City Government, 2014).

Although some studies have been conducted on the welfare of older adults in Taiwan, these were only limited to general situations of social welfare, such as explaining the nature of long-term care and the predicting trends of long-term care needs and demands in Taiwan (Tseng, 2006). A good policy dedicated to the welfare of older adults should improve their quality of life (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2007). Thus, the long-term care system must be adjusted in a timely manner; strategies and policy direction should be reviewed and redirected in conjunction with the understanding of different needs at different time points (Wu, 2005). More importantly, from the viewpoints of older adults, welfare policies could promote and improve their interpersonal

relationships (Smith, 1999). Therefore, in addition to the experts’ point of view, the needs of older adults and consideration of their individual differences are essential in social welfare policy making and social welfare service program design.

Hsieh, Chiu, and Mau (2002) found that because of age, coupled with changes in the environment and times, older adults’ social welfare needs are different. Certainly, different age groups have different social welfare needs because of a variety of aging physical functions (Chen, Chen, & Chu, in press). Furthermore, Daly and Rake (2003) pointed out that social welfare policy for older adults should be made based on differing views of the male or female roles because gender roles may affect individual habits. Finally, people with different functional abilities will have different requirements for using social welfare. Hung, Sung, Chang, Hwang, and Wang (2014) suggested that the needs of older adults and people with disability should be treated differently based on their levels of dependence. Therefore, a greater understanding of the differentiated needs of older adults should impact social welfare services in Taiwan.

This study aimed to (a) describe the current social welfare utilizations and needs of older adults and (b) compare their differences among age groups, genders, and functional dependency levels.

Methods

Design

Survey research was conducted through structured face-to-face interviews.

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in the communities of Kaohsiung City (11 districts with 459 communities), southern Taiwan. Inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) community-dwelling older adults aged 65 and over and (2) participants had to be living in Kaohsiung City for at least 6 months. Participants were screened for dementia through the Short Mental Status Questionnaire and were excluded if they scored 7 or less. Stratified random sampling was used to select the participants from a list of names of older adults provided by the Kaohsiung City government to ensure an equal representation of the participants from the 11 districts in Kaohsiung City. A total of 1,209 potential participants were approached; 694 of them met the inclusion criteria, and 384 (55.33%) of them agreed to participate in this study. Among the 310 older adults who refused to participate, 73.23% of the older adults refused and family members refused in the remaining 26.77% of older adults. The refusal reasons for the older adults and family members who chose not to participate were the result of feelings that it would be difficult or

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