

# Back to Basics



## Importance of Nursing Interventions in the Elderly Critical Care Patient

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### KEYWORDS

• Geriatrics • Health care • Complexity • Chronic conditions • Nursing

### KEY POINTS

- Older adults are a complex patient population.
- The nursing workforce is ill prepared to provide optimal care for this population.
- A “back to basics” approach to nursing care can help to prevent unnecessary complications during hospitalization.
- A knowledge of geriatrics, the ability to adapt care to individual patients, and interdisciplinary teamwork and communication are essential across all transitions of care.

The world’s population is aging, and global predictions estimate that the largest growth sector from 2013 to 2050 will be persons over 60 years of age. By year 2030, 1 in every 8 persons on the planet will be over the age of 65.<sup>1</sup> The United Nations predicts that this sector of the world’s population will triple by the year 2100, reaching 27% of the total global population.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this are 3-fold: People are living longer healthier lives, there are global declines in fertility, and baby boomers are reaching retirement.<sup>3,4</sup> The situation is similar in the United States, with population increases of persons over 65 years expected to more than double from 2010 to 2050 (**Fig. 1**).<sup>5</sup> As population demographics shift, in future decades we will also see a rise in noncommunicable disease that has the potential to stretch our already burdened health care system beyond its limits.<sup>3</sup> Persons with chronic conditions such as heart failure, obesity, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), hypertension, and more, consume vast amounts of our health care resources.<sup>6,7</sup> Alzheimer disease is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Today, an American is

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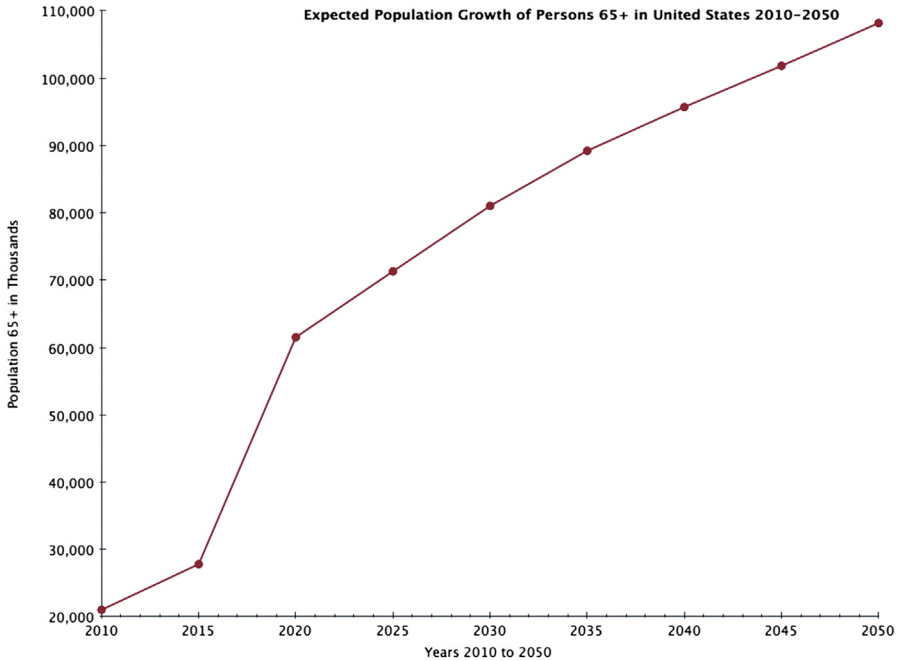
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**Fig. 1.** Projected U.S. population increase for persons over 65. (Data from US Census Bureau. 2008 National population projections: summary tables. Projections of the population by selected age groups and sex for the United States: 2010 to 2050. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2008/summarytables.html>. Accessed August 8, 2014.)

diagnosed with Alzheimer disease every 68 seconds, and by 2050 this diagnosis will occur every 33 seconds.<sup>8</sup>

The workforce is ill prepared to care for an aging demographic: Health care professionals traditionally have little or no curricular content dedicated to geriatric care.<sup>9</sup> Over half the patients hospitalized in the United States are over 65 years old, but less than 1% of the current nursing workforce is certified in geriatrics.<sup>10</sup>

Most of us who have been in practice for many years have traditionally “clumped” the geriatric patient population with young and middle-aged adults. As critical care nurses, we know that our practice is a specialized area, and that specific skills, critical thinking, and prioritization are vital to provide the best care possible for our patients. Most of us would not hesitate to admit our lack of expertise in, for example, pediatrics. If we were in a position where we were outside of our area of expertise we would seek help, information, and perhaps pursue educational offerings to build a sound knowledge base.

Many nursing professionals may not realize the extent to which the geriatric population consumes health care resources, or the complexity in care that older adults bring to the table. From a cost perspective, in 2013 the annual cost of Alzheimer disease to the United States was \$203 billion, and by 2050 this cost is projected to reach \$1.2 trillion annually.<sup>8</sup> Cardiovascular disease and diabetes alone cost the United States over \$750 billion every year.<sup>11</sup> One in 5 elderly adults are readmitted to the hospital within 30 days of discharge.<sup>12</sup> Not only are hospital readmissions costly in terms of finance, but also in terms of morbidity, mortality, and reduced quality of life. Most

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