



Family Digest 42

22nd July 2021

Older Persons and COVID-19

It was established fairly early in the coronavirus pandemic that older persons were particularly vulnerable to severe COVID-19 infection, leading to more fatalities than in the case of people outside that age bracket.¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasised that COVID-19 and the accompanying lockdown were

“changing older people’s daily routines, the care and support they receive, their ability to stay socially connected, and how they are perceived. Older people are being challenged by requirements to spend more time at home, lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues; temporary cessation of employment and other activities; and anxiety and fear of illness and death – their own and others’.”²

By 1st July 2020, three months into the pandemic, South African statistics showed that 1 541 of 2 749 deaths had been recorded among people 60 years and older.³ A significant number of COVID-19 deaths had occurred in institutions for the elderly, which were particularly affected with a high rate of infections and several deaths. The difficult situation of the elderly was compounded by the loneliness and isolation of institutionalized care, where family and friends were unable to visit in terms of the lockdown regulations.

The organisation Helpage International found that “the pandemic has also exposed ageism like never before. Older people have been separated and isolated, portrayed as weak and helpless, and their rights have been ignored. This has taken a toll on their health and wellbeing, and older people now risk facing more violence, abuse and neglect than before the pandemic.”⁴ Older people are at higher risk of serious illness and their odds of survival are the lowest. Many have lost their livelihoods and cannot buy the food or medicine they need to survive. This further aggravates pre-existing health conditions, infirmities and co-morbidities, impacting significantly on their quality of life and their capacity to recover from the virus should they become infected.

The strict lockdown restrictions have resulted in the impoverishment of so many South African households and increased their dependence on social grants to survive. This means that the old-age grant will be stretched more than ever for the needs of the entire household rather than the particular needs of the elderly, thereby pushing them further into extreme poverty.

On the positive side, older persons have been prioritized in terms of the vaccine and hopefully it will be possible to use that momentum to drive better systems of health care for the elderly, particularly in the rural areas.

Pope Francis reminds us that “the elder is not an alien, the elder is us—soon, in a shorter or longer time, inevitably anyway, even if we do not think about it. And if we do not learn to treat the elderly well, that’s how we will be treated.”⁵

Below please find links to articles relating to COVID-19 and older persons, as well as some reflections by Pope Francis on older persons. Finally, it is worth noting that 25th July is World Grandparents’ Day.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

<https://www.spotlightnsp.co.za/2020/07/09/covid-19-more-government-support-needed-for-old-age-facilities-expert/>

<file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/COVID-19%20Impact-Africa-Summary-English.pdf>

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-01/pope-francis-elderly-have-a-role-in-god-s-saving-plan.html>

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-06/pope-francis-world-day-grandparents-elderly-message.html>

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdlife/documents/rc_pont-acd_life_doc_20210202_vecchiaia-nostrofuturo_en.html

Lois Law

Project Co-ordinator

¹An older person in the present context is regarded as anyone over the age of sixty.

² <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/covid-19>

³ <https://www.spotlightnsp.co.za/2020/07/09/covid-19-more-government-support-needed-for-old-age-facilities-expert/>

⁴ <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/bearing-the-brunt>

⁵ https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdlife/documents/rc_pont-acd_life_doc_20210202_vecchiaia-nostrofuturo_en.html

This Digest, or parts thereof, may be reproduced with acknowledgement. For any further enquiries or suggestions, or to receive our regular publications, please contact events@cplo.org.za.