

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 28 (2001)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Old age : "The situation is getting gradually worse"
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906712>

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a fall is all it takes to make a recommendation for permanent residence in a home essential.

Switzerland offers a large number of stylish, comfortable options for retirement housing. A private consortium in Zurich, for example, has set up so-called "single houses" where senior citizens can leverage synergies in order to help each other with day-to-day tasks. There is also sheltered housing, as well as luxurious senior citizens' residences such as the Park Residence Meilen, where the price of accommodation (half-board) is between CHF 5,000 and 15,000 and medical care is charged separately.

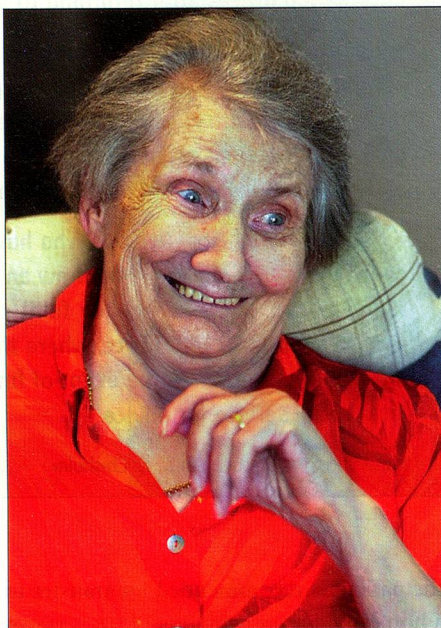
But for those who have not made enquiries well in advance or who have insufficient savings and are now unable to manage on their own, the choice is limited. They need to apply to at least two institutions. It is then up to a state commission to decide where they will be assigned. In many nursing homes the situation is precarious, and such institutions are not subject to any external quality controls.

"Ideally there should be a balanced number of trained personnel and assistants," says Madeleine L., a doctor in a nursing home in eastern Switzerland, "but that's a pipe dream. Wherever you look, there is a shortage of skilled staff." Hans-Ulrich Kneubühler has calculated that the Senior Citizens' and Nursing Home of Lucerne has seven times more unskilled staff members than qualified staff, "and that is far from unusual", he adds. Virtually every day Madeleine L. experiences the tragic consequences of this deficit of



Erwin Zbinden

Luxury end of the market for a discerning clientele: The Park Residence Meilen



Erwin Zbinden

After the death of her husband Emma Ziörjen suffered a stroke. Since then she has been paralysed and partially blind, and lives in a Basle nursing home: "At the beginning it was hard to accept," she says, "but I don't mean to complain – there are others a lot worse off than us."

skilled personnel: most assistants are foreigners, which makes communication with the patients difficult. "There is no more interaction and patients feel isolated," she says. Moreover, the instances of human error are

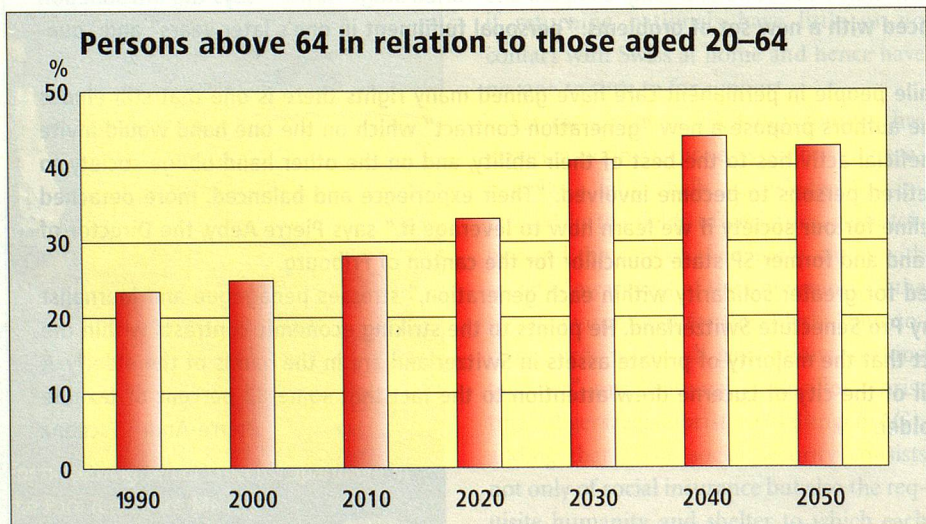
"The situation is

INTERVIEW: GABRIELLE KELLER

When people reach the stage at which they need permanent care, a nursing home is often the only option. Monika Brechbühler, editor-in-chief of the magazine "Homecare", views developments in the nursing home sector with concern.

People are getting older, and more and more of them are needing permanent care. What does this mean for nursing homes? The number of qualified nursing staff is declining. Nursing homes make up for this by hiring auxiliary staff, and qualified nurses have no time to spare for patients because of the need to instruct their untrained colleagues. So the situation is gradually getting worse.


Which doesn't exactly make caring an attractive job...



increasing: broken bones that have been incorrectly set, neglect in the area of personal hygiene. It must also be noted that, at a going rate of CHF 6000 per month, public nursing homes are far from cheap. Moreover, many of the services cost extra. Once a person's savings have been used up, social security has to be called in, frequently to the embarrassment and shame of elderly residents.

How does Switzerland compare with other countries in terms of care for the elderly? Says Kneubühler, "It is difficult to claim that Swiss homes are better than others in the OECD region." According to Madeleine L., residents are increasingly being put to bed for the night during the afternoon because there are too few person-

nel around to see to all the patients later in the evening.

Why this lack of personnel? According to Kneubühler the main culprits are the cantons. They have no interest in improving the quality of nursing homes to any significant degree. Communities used to be proud of their schools, churches and nursing homes. "Pride alone is no longer sufficient," he says. "What is needed is a critical look at life in a home and the strong political will to do everything possible to improve the lot of nursing home residents." 

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm

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getting gradually worse"

Of course not, because it's no fun having to spend most of your time teaching the basics to auxiliaries, many of whom cannot even speak one of our national languages and have no time to build a personal relationship with the residents. A main factor is the very high turnover of staff and employees, who lack motivation due to overwork, excessively long hours and poor working climate. Added to this, there are few instances of successful treatment in nursing homes – most patients are beyond recovery – and residents are often depressed and apathetic due to the lack of communication.

Given such circumstances, do the elderly still have someone they can relate to?

Mostly the answer is no, unless they have relatives or friends who can take care of them and visit them regularly.

Are lack of time and poor training leading to more errors on the part of nursing staff?

Absolutely. I know of one old lady who is partially paralysed but was still able to get around under her own steam when she entered the nursing home. But because no-one had time to give her the requisite physiotherapy, she has gradually lost the ability to walk. She is reluctant to ask someone to help her because she is afraid staff may react negatively and take out their resentment on her.

Such levels of dependence are inhumane and undignified!

And the staff didn't notice anything?

You have to imagine the situation: Sometimes only one nurse per shift is on duty to



Erwin Zbinden


Monika Brechbühler was editor-in-chief for twelve years at "Krankenpflege", a magazine for qualified nursing staff. Two years ago she launched "Homecare", a publication which provides advice specifically for relatives who are caring for ill or infirm relatives.

care for 42 residents! At most she only has time to administer the type of essential medical care she cannot delegate for legal reasons. Everything else goes by the board. And this home is no exception – cases like this are becoming increasingly common.

What's the legal situation?

Of course there is a code that governs the ratio of skilled to unskilled personnel. But it sheer eyewash, because homes find it impossible to comply with. Switzerland has a deficit of 3000 qualified nurses. And there are not enough places available in homes. So in many cases there is a general tendency to conceal the true condition in order to avoid risking the few places available.

Will the situation improve?

Highly unlikely: The baby-boomers will soon be reaching old age. According to Professor François Höpflinger of the Sociological Institute of the University of Zurich, the number of persons requiring care looks set to triple over the next 15 years. The situation will not improve by itself. 

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm