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THE ELDERLY OF NORWAY - A LOOK AHEAD

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THE ELDERLY OF NORWAY - A LOOK AHEAD

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Based on a lecture presented at the Brookdale Institute  
while the author was a Visiting Fellow.

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## ABSTRACT

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The increase in the numbers of elderly and in their longevity will clearly lead to changes in retirement policies and service provision. This paper discusses likely trends among the elderly in Norway, where the scenario of the 1990s will probably feature high unemployment levels and a near-universal desire to retire at the earliest age possible. While improvements in the self-sufficiency of the elderly are expected, domiciliary services will, at best, keep pace with the present coverage of needs. The lack of institutional beds will be at least as problematic as it is today. Labor force relocation has reduced the informal support available to aging parents. The ability and willingness of the young-old to serve as social service volunteers may represent one possible solution.

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"Teach your tongue to say 'I don't  
know' lest you invent something."  
(Talmud, Berakoth 4a)

## Introduction

Changes in the living conditions and status of a population occur slowly and less perceptibly than changes in individuals. Nevertheless, over time, trends of change in culture and lifestyle form clear pictures. Norwegian policymakers concerned with the wellbeing of the aged have described the 1960s as the "golden" or "optimistic" years and the 1970s as the "institutional development period". My pessimistic label for the 1980s is the "meagre years".

It is beyond my capacity to label the 1990s. Yet, let me speculate on the increasing number of elderly, the extension of life in retirement, the question of independence and social networks, and forms of services and care. For those who will become "the aged" in the 1990s, my speculations are a mixture of beliefs, hopes, and apprehensions. The questions are far more numerous than the assertions. Assumptions concerning the number of elderly in 1990 are uncertain, and any suggestion about more complicated matters such as the economy, employment, and social conditions are still more doubtful.

Given this lack of certainty, population projections should offer some comfort. Figures available from Norway's Central Bureau of Statistics suggest that the number of elderly (ages 67+) will achieve its peak for this century in 1990. The 80+ age group will continue to rise beyond that point and, as we are aware, this group contains a relatively high proportion in need



of services and care. The security that we gain by taking population projections as our starting point is supported by the Bureau's comment: "The figures as regards the elderly may be regarded as relatively reliable." So far, so good. But their commentary continues: "In the long term, however, small changes in mortality may influence the size of this population."<sup>1</sup>

This point can be demonstrated by comparing two recent projections of the Norwegian population, prepared in 1979 and 1982. The latter projection hypothesizes a lower mortality rate than does the earlier 1979 model. By 1990 the differences between the two projections amount to 17,000 elderly aged 67+ and 11,000 aged 80+. Come the turn of the century these differences climb to 40,000 and 25,000 elderly in the two respective age groups.

I am concerned about such differences for two reasons. First, they indicate the uncertainty of our assumptions concerning basic demographic features of the elderly population in the near future. In turn, this suggests that assumptions concerning more complex topics such as the economy, employment and social conditions are even more doubtful. Second, the gap between these projections is not trifling if related to the need for institutional beds. Employing the reduced-mortality 1982 projections, the estimated need for nursing beds by 1990 stands at 1,500 - 3,500 more beds than would be needed under the 1979 projection with a higher mortality regime.

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<sup>1</sup> -----  
Central Bureau of Statistics (Norway), Projections of the Population, 1982-2025, 1982, p.12.

### Extension of Retirement Life at Both Ends

The enormous increase in life expectancy in the 20th century is linked to the reduction in mortality during the first part of life. In recent decades, however, there has also been an increase in life expectancy at age 70. This is the case for both sexes, although the trend is more pronounced for women. A crucial question is whether this change is due to better health in later years or to the ability of the frail elderly to live longer. Svanborg's longitudinal study of elderly aged 70 in Gothenburg indicates that their physical and mental health conditions have indeed improved.

Despite this uncertainty, the upper end of the retirement period has shifted upward. Simultaneously, strong forces are actively extending the retirement period by pushing the retirement age downward. One argument for lowering the retirement age is that flexibility and the possibility for a gradual retirement are essential. This argument also holds that those who so desire should have the right to continue working until at least age 70. Our experience in Norway indicates, however, that very few people choose to continue working after reaching the lowest age limit for retirement. For example, at the end of 1981, 93 percent of those ages 67-69 received old age pensions. In this group of approximately 110,000, 97 percent earned a full pension (i.e., had quit their jobs), while only three percent earned  $1/4 - 3/4$  of a full pension; in other words, only a small minority was retiring gradually.

There is no available Norwegian information on the extent to which this trend results from individual choice. In some



occupations (policemen, firemen) the retirement age is lower than age 67. Since the flexible retirement system was introduced in 1973, a number of workplaces have lowered the retirement age to 67, implying that older employees have no right to remain at work. Studies indicate that those who can work beyond age 67 are reluctant to do so because they feel they are expected to quit.

In Norway, retirement - a life of leisure - is considered a good thing, to be welcomed as soon as possible. In times of unemployment, more workers retire early. If there is an increase in unemployment in the 1990s, then more workers will take early retirement. Labor market conditions will thus be of great significance to the quality of life and welfare of the elderly. One Ministry of Finance group of experts regards -

"..... unemployment as linked to adjustment problems in short-, medium- and long-term perspectives. With long-range objectives in mind, work should be considered as a scant resource, limiting growth in production and welfare. Other countries have had high and rising unemployment rates for a number of years. We must realize that we have similar policy problems and that Norway does not make best use of the resource that the country's labor supply constitutes." <sup>2</sup>

The message of this report seems to support my pessimism concerning the probability of continued unemployment and its consequent impact on the retirement community. The Vienna International Plan of Action on Aging of 1982 dealt with this problem in the following way:

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Finance (Norway), Prospects for the Norwegian Economy until the Year 2000, 1983.

"Despite the significant unemployment problems facing many nations, in particular with regard to young people, the retirement age for employees should not be lowered except on a voluntary basis." (Recommendation 37 (d), p. 42)

While few nations will disagree with this recommendation, probably even fewer will take any account of it.

Norwegian unemployment trends indicate that the country's unemployment rate will probably increase. This trend will significantly affect the debate over retirement age. The economic forces linked to unemployment may be strong enough by the early 1990s to defeat those of us who oppose an earlier retirement age.

#### The Possibilities for Services and Care

Prophecying the fate of residential homes is problematic. I sense a renaissance for such institutions which, ten years ago, were derided and presumably doomed. Some recently-built nursing homes also include a residential ward, unfortunately not always equipped with a private bath and toilet, as prescribed by regulations. While we shall have to live with the massive institutions already in existence, from now on we must build smaller institutions.

The demand for beds in nursing homes in the years before 2010 should correspond to seven percent of the population 70 years and older. The proportion in need of residential care is assumed to be the same as that in residential homes in 1981, namely 3.4 percent in the 70+ age group. These projections are questionable, as some of the aged in residential homes are

actually in need of nursing care and some of the nursing home patients could manage on a lower level of care. To complicate matters, the waiting lists indicate a real unmet need. However, these estimates should fairly accurately reflect the need for institutional beds. This involves a need for an additional 7,000 beds by 1990 and the possibility of achieving this goal is doubtful.

One optimistic argument is that further development of home help and home nursing care will reduce the need for institutional care. This would entail a major expansion of 24-hour care and a greater reliance on family care. We hope that the optimists are right.

The Norwegian working-age population, here defined as 20-64 years, will increase slightly in the near future. Therefore, domiciliary and institutional care will not be seriously hampered by a lack of available manpower. However, the extent to which this manpower will be used in providing services to the aged depends on our ability to administer an adequate labor market policy.

The family is usually the most significant source of social contact for the independent elderly. For the dependent elderly, the family is the support which enables the aged to manage at home. Family help is provided mainly by spouses and children. However, 63 and 85 percent of women over ages 70 and 80, respectively, are single and therefore lack access to significant help from a spouse. Further, a husband's help may be limited since he is often older than his wife. And, if more women take paid employment, then there will be a diminution in the potential

for family care. This will lead to greater demands on the public service system.

One of Norway's most popular domiciliary services for the elderly is the odd-job service. The men of this service are employed by the municipality to give the elderly a helping hand with minor repairs and other small matters. With the unmet need for home care services on the rise, consideration should be given to improving the efficiency of the overall home care system by letting the odd-job service undertake more varied tasks than it does today.

In the 1990s it will be very difficult to obtain home care from nurses, chiropodists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and especially home helps. It is questionable, even with continued unemployment, whether a sufficient number of women will work in this capacity, and males in such jobs are a small minority. I advocate introduction of a compulsory social service for women, equivalent to military service. However, this proposal is not widely supported.

#### Are the Elderly Becoming More Independent?

Are the elderly are becoming more resourceful and self-sufficient? This may be the case. Improved housing conditions, especially sanitary equipment and heating, are facilitating personal care and daily activities. A general improvement in housing conditions, however, does not imply that housing problems for the aged will disappear in the 1990s. Capacity and capability to obtain adequate housing vary to a great extent



among the aged, and public contributions towards an improved standard of housing for the aged differ similarly.

Studies conducted by our Institute indicate that the take-up rates of housing improvement loans and State Housing Bank grants vary greatly between municipalities. The extent of take-up appears closely related to the information and guidance provided by local government authorities. Current trends in Norway towards decentralization and greater local autonomy are likely to contribute towards differences between municipalities in the area of housing for the elderly, as well as in the health and social services.

One issue presently under debate is the wisdom of maintaining the present policy of building separate "family flats" and "flatlets" for the elderly. In the long run, neither the elderly nor younger people can profit from an age-segregated housing policy.

The possibility of self-sufficiency is enhanced by an improvement in the health of the elderly. In 1982, the World Health Organization published a report which stated:

"A very important question concerns the possibility of preventing the functional consequences of aging. Recent studies have shown, for example, that it is possible, even at an advanced age, to improve the quality of muscle function, which is of obvious significance for the prevention of accidents among the elderly. The reduction in muscle function seen with age, therefore, seems to be a combined effect of inactivity and aging.<sup>3</sup>

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3 World Health Organization, Epidemiological Studies on Social and Medical Conditions of the Elderly, 1982.



The WHO specifies nutrition, smoking, and alcohol as lifestyle factors influencing state of health. Responsibility for our own health is generally accepted; the crucial point, however, is how well we listen to the health prophets' advice. Are we willing to stop smoking and drink less alcohol? Are more people jogging into retirement age, sticking to the American slogan, "Run, don't rest"?

### The Elderly and Social Networks

A critical question regarding the elderly in the 1990s is whether life satisfaction and safety will be promoted by more security locks and advanced burglar alarms, or by the feeling of safety provided through social contact with family and friends. Wellbeing and life satisfaction depend upon being able to leave one's home in the afternoon and evening without anxiety and fear. The large number of assaults and robberies which are reported have an especially negative impact on especially the elderly.

Another reason for concern over the potential support of social networks is the fear that these networks will become so coarsely meshed that the aged will fall through. The North Sea oil and information-based technologies are likely to continue to pull younger people from rural to urban areas. In the new urban centers, the oil worker family's contribution to local social networks has come into question. Findings from an extensive study of the social impact of the oil industry indicate:

"... a marked tendency towards 'familism' among the oil workers, i.e., a tendency to enclose the privacy of the family, to shield it against (cont.)

and disengage it from other parts of society. This tendency is not unambiguous but dominating. ... The majority<sup>4</sup> describe this 'exclusion' as a problem."

This somewhat gloomy perspective makes the contribution of the elderly seem even more useful and needed. There may be a reason for optimism regarding the influence of the aged. According to a recent article in one of the largest Norwegian newspapers, the elderly "are now making their mark - in cultural life, in organizations, in education ..." "The elderly", states the author, "are our greatest resource for a healthier existence for all age groups and for society at large". Despite experience and knowledge, however, the capability of the elderly to care for themselves is not generally acknowledged. A few days after the above-mentioned article, another article appeared. In it, a welfare official interviewed about a housing subsidy scheme, said:

"Old people often have problems when filling out forms. Therefore the local government must help them..... We have to visit all the elderly and assist them in filling out the application forms."

While newspaper interviews are not always a reliable source of information, I would venture to suggest that a good many younger people easily describe the elderly in such undifferentiated terms. The scourge of stereotyping of the elderly will not disappear in the near future.

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<sup>4</sup> "Forskyningsnytt" 5-6/83, p. 53, p. 55.

## Life in Retirement: Self-Description

I recently have become absorbed in reading the autobiographies of elderly Norwegians, submitted in the course of a national competition. Indeed, I have toyed with the thought that these life histories should be made compulsory reading for Norwegians, in order to demonstrate the individuality of the aged. Even granting that the writers represent a self-selected group with the capacity and strength to prepare the history of their lives, few were born favored by fortune. Most struggled through meagre living conditions difficult to imagine in today's welfare society.

We have in Norway been generally less concerned with the satisfied elderly than with those with problematic lives, unmet service needs, or those in institutions. Most of these autobiographers were fairly content with life in old age, without glorifying it. To balance the picture, I shall present a few statements and self-descriptions as they appear in these life histories.

In describing his interests, one recently-retired 68 year-old man writes: "Life in retirement will not be boring as long as I keep fit. I do, however, miss old times, community sing-alongs and the public lectures of my youth - ones that were clever, which I often listened to, and which I left feeling especially enriched. That which one listens to on radio or views on television are poor substitutes....."

A woman aged 69 writes: "And now we have reached the final period of life: life in retirement. The useless age. One can

only walk around, take care of oneself, and then thank God for that only so long as we stay healthy. We are not, however, entirely forgotten by society. We still receive tax bills, telephone and electricity bills.... I often wonder which are the best, the old days or the present." Her conclusion, however, is not that the so-called 'good old days' should be brought back. Rather, she suggests that we ought to preserve the best of the life patterns of former generations. She feels that modern childrearing practices are inferior to those she experienced both as a child and employed as a mother. Her children left home long ago and, she continues "Now we are left on our own. It can often be very dull, especially in winter for my husband Olaf."

The problem of finding an acceptable balance between living conditions and quality of life is the concern of many of the writers. One of them states: "There is reason to be grateful for all the good which has come our way..... But there is no reason to boast about it. Those who lived before us had many qualities to be remembered and maintained."

A retired teacher reminds us that the transition to retirement can be a difficult one: "Every autumn it was painful to see the children with their satchels. I would shed a few tears; I needed years to adapt!"

How many of us who shall be elderly come the 1990s will be able to agree to the statement by one of the writers: "We are in fact very comfortable..... We have a carefree life." This 78 year-old man takes daily walks, of which he says "..... alone and undisturbed, one experiences nature with the greatest intensity."



### The Young-old and the Old-old in the 1990s

At the start of the 1990s, the aged population will include those born between 1895 and 1925. Some will have experienced one - and some two - world wars. All will have witnessed the 1930s and the development of the welfare state. The living conditions during the youth of the 65 and 85 year-olds have been different enough to create the concept of a generation gap. For young retirees, this gap is paralleled by the gap in knowledge and experience between themselves and the old-old.

It is beyond my capacity to draw any clear picture of these age groups in the 1990s. I cannot even predict with assurance the number of aged who will be categorized as "young-old" or "old-old". In broad terms, I would suggest that the young-old will be fairly healthy and will have adequate housing and ample opportunities for leisure time activities. They are unlikely to find paid work, but may feel obliged to make a contribution as volunteers in the social services, or to share the responsibility of providing family care. Identity problems may easily occur when the young-old feel pressured by and distanced from the younger population on the one hand and the old-old on the other.

Improved housing conditions will benefit the old-old, but less so than the young-old. In both urban and rural areas, some of the old-old will occupy inadequate housing, creating problems both for them and for their care providers. Domiciliary services will, at best, keep pace with the present coverage of needs. The lack of institutional beds will be at least as problematic as it is today.



These concerns about the future should serve to underscore the responsibility of both individuals and society to continue to discuss how the standard of living and quality of life of the aged can be best maintained despite the many constraints.

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The elderly of Norway-A look ahead /

Beverfelt, Eva



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## המכון

הוא מכון ארצי למחקר, לניסוי ולחינוך בגרונטולוגיה והתפתחות אדם וחברה. הוא נוסד ב-1974 ופועל במסגרת הג'וינט האמריקאי (ועד הסיוע המאוחד של יהודי אמריקה), בעזרתן של קרן ברוקדייל בניו-יורק וממשלת ישראל.

בפעולתו מנסה המכון לזהות בעיות חברתיות ולהציב להן פתרונות חילופיים בשירותי הבריאות והשירותים הסוציאליים בכללם. אחד מיעדיו הוא להגביר שיתוף הפעולה של מומחים מהאקדמיות והממשלה, עובדי ציבור ופעילים בקהילה כדי לגשר בין מחקר לבין מימוש מסקנות מחקר הלכה למעשה.

## סידרה בינלאומית

המאמרים מציגים מימצאי מחקר והשקפות מקצועיות של מלומדים אורחים מחו"ל, של אנשי אקדמיה בארץ ושל חברי סגל המכון. המאמרים בסידרה מציגים דיונים החורגים מעבר להקשר האמפירי הישראלי, או עוסקים בסוגיות מושגיות ומתודולוגיות בעלות ענין בינלאומי כללי. בכך משמשת הסידרה במה שבה נבחנו בפרספקטיבה בינלאומית ההלכה והמעשה של נושאי ההזדקנות.

הממצאים והמסקנות המוצגים הם של המחבר או המחברים וללא כוונה ליצג את אלה של המכון או של פרטים וגופים אחרים הקשורים למכון.

הקשישים כנורכגיה - מכס לעחיד

אוה ברפלד

המכון הנורכגי לגרונסולוגיה

הרצאה שניתנה במכון ברוקדייל  
בעת שהמרצה היתה חוקרת אורחת במכון

מרס 1986

ירושלים

## תקציר

הגידול במספר הקשישים והארכת תוחלת החיים שלהם תביא, ללא ספק, לשינויים במדיניות הפרישה ובהספקת השירותים. מאמר זה עוסק במגמות ההתפתחות אצל הקשישים בנורבגיה, שם צפויים בשנות ה-90 שיעור אבטלה גבוה בקרב כלל האוכלוסייה ונטייה לצאת לגמלאות מוקדם ככל האפשר. על אף שצפוי שהקשישים יהיו יותר עצמאיים, נראה ששירותי הטיפול הביתי יצליחו, לכל היותר, לשמור על הרמה הנוכחית של מענה על הצרכים. בעית המחסור במיטות מוסדיות תמשיך להיות חריפה כפי שהיא כיום, אם לא יותר. הכורח להעתיק את מקום המגורים בגלל העבודה הביא להקטנת שיעור העזרה הבלתי פורמלית להורים מזדקנים. אחד הפתרונות האפשריים הוא נכונותם של קשישים-צעירים לשמש כמתנדבים בשירותים הסוציאליים.



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