

Charter of civil society on the dignified treatment of the elderly

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We advocate a society,

- which regards population aging as an opportunity and treats the elderly as a valuable resource;
- which acknowledges aging as a normal phase of human existence;
- in which the elderly are able, with self-assurance, to live and shape a culture appropriate to their age;
- in which the elderly are able to continue to develop until a great old age;
- in which people recognize their vulnerability, dependence and finite nature and are able to count upon the solidarity of others;
- which unreservedly respects the dignity of old people, regardless of their state of health or situation in life;
- in which elderly people are given the necessary support and appropriate services are developed to meet their needs;
- in which the self-determination of elderly people is still respected even if their ability to judge for themselves is reduced;
- in which the psychosocial needs of the elderly are taken as seriously as their physical needs;
- in which death is perceived as an integral part of life and all persons affected by death receive helpful and dignified support.

PART I: IDEAS

1. Population aging as an opportunity and a challenge

On average, we live to an older age than all the generations which came before us. The proportion of elderly persons in society at large is growing. The group of the very elderly is growing fastest. An increasing number of elderly people remain relatively healthy and independent until an advanced age. Society can benefit from the increasing ability of elderly people to shape its very nature. This resource must be recognised and used. Population aging must be acknowledged as an achievement of modern society and taken seriously with its opportunities and challenges. Elderly people are an important segment of society to which we owe much of our present prosperity. They must be treated with respect and esteem and all kinds of discrimination on grounds of age must be rejected.

> We advocate a society which regards population aging as an opportunity and treats the elderly seriously as a precious resource.

2. Affirmation of aging

Most people wish to live as long as possible. But very few want to be old. However, age is an integral part of the course of life. Life means change and growing older. This necessitates a context in society which acknowledges age and creates the conditions necessary for people to grow old well, regardless of their particular state of health. A booming anti-aging movement today tries to convince us of the need to remain young as long as possible. Its radical representatives understand aging as something deficient and sick which must be combated. That view cannot be accepted; it promotes an attitude of society that is hostile to age and places old people under pressure. A society in which people live long lives requires an essentially positive assessment of age without trying to embellish its more challenging sides.

> We advocate a society which affirms age as a normal part of human development.

3. Developing a new age culture

Every phase in life has its own meaning, its own possibilities and challenges. If the slogan “Forever young” declares youth to be a desirable goal, one phase in life is made the norm for the whole of life. However, no single phase of life can become the yardstick by which other phases are judged. Only if young people consciously live their youth and old people are able to live a self-assured old age can the two enrich each other and the different generations coexist. Old people must therefore be encouraged to adopt a self-assured attitude to growing old and develop an age culture appropriate to their particular phase in life with its own values and priorities which they contribute actively to society. In society, space and recognition must be created for that culture of age. It will also be reflected in the provision of suitable living space, adapted to the specific needs of old people.

> We advocate a society in which elderly people are able to live and shape with self-assurance an age culture which meets their needs.

4. Aging is an opportunity for further development

Recent age research has clearly shown that people can continue to develop until a great old age. This development brings benefits for the aging person and for society at large. Such benefits likewise arise in cases where people are able to deal constructively with the losses brought about by age. The task of society is to create background conditions which assist development in old age and enable elderly people to use their own resources and experience further personal development until the end of their lives.

> We advocate a society in which elderly people can continue to develop until great old age.

5. Dealing with the central issues of human existence

Very old people are confronted to a particularly intense degree with the experience of limits and losses. They become increasingly aware of their dependence upon others and of the finite nature of life. Those are all central aspects of every life. Elderly people present a challenge to society - the challenge of reflecting upon the fundamental importance of such experience to life in all its phases. They help to ensure that society does not repress basic human phenomena such as vulnerability, dependence and the finite nature of life, because without acceptance of those realities there can be no fulfilled existence and no humane society.

> We advocate a society in which people are conscious of their vulnerability, dependence and finite existence and able to count upon the solidarity of others.

6. Human dignity must be preserved even in great old age

The dignity of each individual is inalienable and must not be damaged in any situation. It is not linked to any conditions and holds good, regardless of health or illness, existing abilities or losses which have been suffered and regardless too of the financial situation. People suffering from dementia or elderly persons who are heavily dependent upon care are entitled to this human dignity to the same extent as all other persons. They are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect by others. There are voices today which claim that very old persons lose their dignity because of a serious illness such as dementia. That view must be resolutely opposed. However, care and nursing or the prevailing conditions of life can be undignified if they pay too little respect to the inalienable dignity of a person.

> We advocate a society which pays unlimited respect to the dignity of old people whatever their state of health or situation in life happens to be.

7. The need of the elderly for support is growing

Because of the population trend, the need for care, nursing and accompaniment for the very old will increase considerably in future decades. It is not clear at this juncture how that need will be met, but one of the urgent tasks of politicians and society is to develop appropriate solutions. Effective solutions can only be found if the area of accompaniment, nursing and care (referred to as “care”) and rehabilitation are promoted more strongly than acute medicine (“cure”); if domestic and institutional care and nursing are acknowledged as a highly demanding, socially and politically important task and honoured accordingly; if the task of nursing and care is no longer left to women alone but also performed by men. In view of the foreseeable decline in family care and the shortage of specialist nurses which lies ahead, a new mix of care home services, Spitex home care services, family care and respite services must be sought. A perfectly matched chain of professional and voluntary services must be promoted and due attention given to solidarity between older people themselves. That necessitates intensive promotion of basic and further training of the persons working in this area.

> We advocate a society in which elderly persons receive the assistance they need and in which appropriate services are developed to meet the existing demand.

8. Treatment, nursing and care are guided by self-determination

Elderly people who are dependent upon support have a permanent right to respect for their self-determination. This still applies when they are no longer able to express their own autonomy. Care and nursing must enhance the existing resources of persons who are in need of such care and encourage their independence. The aim of support must be to help people to help themselves. If people are no longer able to judge for themselves, their presumed wishes must be determined. That must guide all action. In this connection, dispositions made by patients must be taken seriously. Decisions taken for them must be reached by structured interdisciplinary decision-making processes of all concerned, including persons close to them.

> We advocate a society in which the self-determination of elderly persons is still respected, even if their judgment is reduced.

9. Human attention is as important as professional support

Holistic care and nursing do not consist solely of competent services, but also of sympathetic human attention and the willingness to talk to the persons who need care and their relatives. That attention must also be acknowledged in the billing systems which are applied.

> We advocate a society in which the psychosocial needs of elderly persons are taken as seriously as their physical needs.

10. Development of a dignified culture of death

Death is a central aspect of life. As a majority of people nowadays die in care homes and hospitals, those institutions are particularly important with a view to the development of a dignified culture of death. The issues of dying, the culture of death and aid to the dying must be discussed in public in the most sensitive possible manner, taking due account of all the aspects. The public authorities must create good background conditions for death and for services to assist the dying and their relatives. Action taken to ensure the best possible death is part of the endeavours to preserve the highest quality of life until the end. Here, palliative care plays a central role. Humane medicine works on the assumption that its task is not only to fight death, but also to provide a dignified accompaniment for death.

> We advocate a society in which death is perceived as part of life and all persons affected by death are given helpful and dignified support.

PART II: DEMANDS

We have set out below, by way of example, demands which emerge from the ideas put forward in Part I. This list is intended to encourage the different persons who have to deal with the issue of aging to draw further consequences from those ideas in their own particular context.

1. Population aging as an opportunity and challenge

- Population aging must be clearly seen as an opportunity and not always simply treated as a problem.
- The contribution made in the past by old people to society and their present contribution in many areas must be recognised more effectively by the public. Active senior citizens must be involved in as many areas of society as possible and their commitment supported.
- The discussion by politicians and the media must endeavour to treat the subject with appropriate objectivity and refrain from using derogatory terms which devalue elderly persons, such as “the flood of old people”, “the burden of old age”, “the grey society” or “home inmates”.

2. Affirmation of aging

- We expect media reporting about old people to take their resources seriously and not to focus on a unilateral perspective of inadequacies. Care and nursing organisations for old people are particularly challenged to help shape the work done by the media.
- Prominent public attention must be attracted to positive images of old age. Targeted promotion of health in old age plays a central role, in the sense of strengthening the physical and mental resources of elderly persons.
- Geriatric or geronto-psychiatric medicine and nursing must be promoted at the level of basic and further training and also as a field of work.
- Elderly people must encounter respect and consideration. They must be treated in the way in which you would yourself like one day to be treated by younger persons.

3. Developing a new age culture

- Elderly people must be encouraged to develop an appropriate culture consistent with their age, instead of being guided by the standards of the younger generations.
- The self-organisation of elderly persons and all forms of participation by them in society must be supported. The background conditions of society must be shaped in such a way that old people are able to work to support their own interests. They must be represented with equal rights in social and political bodies.
- The formation of councils of senior citizens in local authorities or of councils of occupants of care homes is to be welcomed.

- A flexible retirement age must be adopted.

4. Aging is an opportunity for further development

- Opportunities for further training in old age and for elderly persons to participate in the life of society are to be promoted. At the same time, the fact that some people cannot or do not wish to make use of these opportunities must be respected.
- Society will find it increasingly necessary to provide opportunities for work, commitment and employment of elderly persons.
- In the accompaniment of elderly persons, importance attaches to the willingness to discuss with them the fundamental issues of existence with which they are confronted in this phase of life.
- Intergenerational encounters provide important incentives for further development and must therefore be encouraged. New technologies must be made accessible to the elderly.
- On the other hand, steps must also be taken to ensure that old people who are not familiar with the new technologies can still use public services.
- Public service must also be adapted to the needs of old people.
- The organisation of daily life in care homes must be adapted to the needs and resources of the people living in them.

5. Dealing with central issues of human existence

- Human experience such as illness, death or dependence on the support of others must be regarded as central aspects of human life and an integral part of our vision of humanity.
- Public awareness of the fact that even a life with limitations is still a valuable and meaningful life must be promoted.

6. Human dignity is an inalienable right even in great old age

- Human dignity and the human rights of elderly people must be acknowledged and respected unconditionally.
- The idea that dignity is lost in old age or because of illness must be resolutely opposed.
- Generally derogatory attitudes to age (ageism) must be identified and fought.
- Ombudsmen and crisis intervention agencies to prevent age discrimination and all forms of violence against elderly people must be created.
- The dignified accompaniment of old people in the institutional and domestic sphere must be assured through suitable measures.

7. The need for support for the elderly is growing

- Gerontologic and geriatric knowledge must play a greater role in nursing and medical training.
- Gerontological research, including the provision of relevant statistical material, must be promoted.
- Outpatients and semi-hospitalised care services are to be developed.
- Elderly people too are entitled to rehabilitation. The necessary financing must be provided.
- Appropriate supporting services must be made available for all old persons (e.g. including elderly migrants or mentally ill old persons). Psychosocial accompaniment must also be provided wherever possible.
- All necessary measures must be taken to train an adequate number of nursing and care personnel in Switzerland.
- Working conditions must be promoted which make it easier for professional carers with family commitments, older professional carers and persons returning to the profession to continue to pursue their occupation or to return to it.
- The background conditions for family care must be improved or existing opportunities made better known (e.g. earnings compensation for professional family members who provide care).
- Family members who provide care must be given greater support through appropriate advisory and respite services. These offerings must be financially supported by the public authorities.
- Initiatives of voluntary support such as “Senior citizens help each other” and forms of neighbourhood aid are to be promoted.
- The work of volunteers must be acknowledged and supported more effectively in society.

8. Treatment, care and nursing must focus on self-determination

- Care guided by needs and focusing on persons must be strengthened.
- Guided interdisciplinary case studies to determine the presumed will of an elderly person are to be encouraged. Members of family must be included.
- The contents of the new law on the protection of adults must be made known.

9. Human sympathy is as important as professional support

- Human sympathy must be acknowledged as a basic component of nursing and care. This should be made clear in job descriptions. Adequate financial compensation must be provided for care and nursing services.
- An adequate number of personnel must be available.
- Training and further training of staff to develop their psychosocial competences must be encouraged. An opportunity for coaching may also be helpful.

10. Development of a culture of death which respects human dignity

- The development of palliative care concepts and their financing must be promoted.
- Basic and further training in palliative care must be enhanced.
- Mobile palliative care teams which can be called upon to assist smaller institutions must be developed.
- The national palliative care strategy outlined by the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), including the necessary financing, must be implemented rapidly.
- The possibility of dying at home must be assisted by developing Spitex home care and palliative care teams.