

Multiculturalism as an Asset in Senior Care

A case study in a Swiss nursing home

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Abstract

Background: The Swiss population is aging. Thanks to a young migrant population, Swiss growth rate is still positive. Because of the general shrinking workforce and of the growing needs of the senior caregiving sector, the Health field is dependent of foreign caregivers and qualified workers.

La Fondation *Les Baumettes* is a nursing home near Lausanne in the French speaking part of Switzerland. The population of this institution reflects the multicultural face of Switzerland and illustrates the successive flows of immigration of the last decades. The patients are the cohort born in the 1920's: many came to Switzerland seeking work and are growing old in the host country. The employees of the nursing home reflect the modern migration: they found work in the Swiss Health sector.

What do senior patients think of this situation?

Method, issues and recommendations: a panel was chosen amongst the senior patients. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviewees had to be able to understand and answer specific questions on a sensible topic. This prerequisite reduced the size of the final panel and old age and cognitive problems also induced bias.

This case study focuses on senior patients' perception of their foreign caregivers. Further work could be done by interviewing caregivers to analyze how they cope with multiculturalism, and then widen the topic to study the effects of immigration on the workplace in the Swiss Health sector.

Results: majority of the panel 1) did not know that their caregivers were of other nationalities than Swiss, and did not care about this; 2) declared being surprised by the number of different nationalities represented in the nursing home, but 3) was aware of the shrinking of workforce in Switzerland and was feeling grateful towards the foreign caregivers coming to Switzerland to help Seniors.

Therefore, for senior patients, skin color, country of origin and nationality do not matter, as long as the caregiver speaks French, and does his/her best to communicate with the patient clearly and politely.

Conclusions: Swiss tradition of open-mind is internalized by the elderly patients and important to them. Multiculturalism is perceived as positive by the panel, and interviewees were able to control their answers in a politically correct manner. In everyday life and caring, whatever their nationality, it is the personality of workers and their ability to communicate that are important to senior patients.

What is more, diversity is entertaining because patients enjoy when migrant workers speak of their countries. Cultural Exchange brings positive effects on the patients and enhances everyday life in the nursing home by bringing new ideas or sharing various experiences, e.g. enjoying together many different national foods, music or habits.

In this Swiss nursing home, Multiculturalism turns out to be **an asset** in Senior Care.

Key words: Social Aging, Multiculturalism, Foreign care workers, foreign patients