Foreword

The number of older people in our society has increased significantly. Individuals sixty-five years and older constituted 4 percent of the U.S. population and approximately 3 million persons in 1900 compared to the 11 percent and over 25 million people today. This book focuses on the old-old, the fastest growing segment of our population. The impact of these demographic changes is profound and affects our personal lives. Most of us can expect to live longer than our ancestors. More of us will be involved in the care of an elderly person. This is because frailty is positively associated with age. Of course, there is tremendous variability in functioning, and there are many elders in their eighties and older who are healthy, vigorous, and active in their intellectual and leisure pursuits. There are also individuals in their fifties and younger who have been incapacitated by a stroke, an accident, or Alzheimer's disease. As a general rule, however, physical and mental disabilities increase with age, necessitating more supportive services.

The editors and contributors of this book have performed a valuable service for people whose lives are intimately affected by the aging phenomenon. They have gathered an important set of gerontological information and packaged it in a way that is easy to understand. This information is useful whether we apply it to our own lives or utilize it in the care of others. Each chapter includes vignettes which illustrate the concepts discussed. Together, the chapters enable us to understand the aging process and how to deal with a possible decline in health.

The information is timely. Reforms in the health system are redirecting the flow of the aged from formal, more expensive

providers of health care to community based services. Hospital stays are shorter and referrals to long-term care facilities are avoided whenever possible. As a consequence, families and friends find that the major responsibility for meeting the needs of very old relatives and loved ones is in their hands. These caregivers represent a range of people. Spouses tend to provide the most help with the least stress and are the most important factor in preventing institutionalization. Children, particularly those who live with or near parents, and daughters more than sons, supply emotional support and services in various forms—transportation, personal care, and housecleaning, to name a few. Sometimes grandchildren, nieces, neighbors, and friends serve as the major source of assistance. Unlike the past when life expectancy was shorter, the care of an aged person, for most of us, will not be limited to a single incident, but, rather, it will involve several experiences—first with grandparents, then with parents, and finally with spouse as we ourselves get older.

Caregivers are not without competing responsibilities. More women, who assume the major burden of care, are in the labor force than ever before. Younger caregivers may have children who must be provided for, and older caregivers may be faced with their own declining health. Caring for the aged is rewarding, but it is difficult and exhausting as well. The care provided at home today requires greater sophistication and technical knowledge, and because of the prevalence of chronic conditions, takes place over a longer period of time. It also entails personal sacrifices. Because we are human, anger, resentment, and frustration may well within us. Aggressive behaviors which are generally suppressed may surface. All caregivers experience such feelings and behaviors. It is important that we recognize our limitations and find ways to relieve our burden and stress. An increasingly important task that caregivers should assume is to serve as the locaters and linkers of services provided by various agencies and individuals for both the elderly and themselves. *Our Aging Parents* is a resource which caregivers will find immensely valuable.

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