

More seniors face good, bad sides of aging

By Marge Alpern
special writer

Americans are living longer and having greater income stability, better health and more living options. On the other hand, senior citizens fear chronic illness and financial insecurity.

Last week in Grand Rapids, a Governor's Conference on Aging addressed those twin themes as 700 professionals from agencies, hospitals and universities confronted what the U.S. Census Department called a "social phenomenon without historical precedence." Several Oakland County experts attended the session.

THE 65-AND-UP population has grown twice as fast as the rest of the population since 1960, census figures show.

By 2030, one-fifth of all Americans will be 65 or over, a leap from 30 million people today to 65 million within a generation.

The conference's tone was positive, saying old age is no longer viewed as a time when one's options are drastically limited. Today, many seniors are better educated, have greater income stability, better health, and more living options than ever before, and all of these qualities are getting even better.

BUT CHRONIC illness and financial insecurity continue to be the two major fears of seniors.

Although many Americans have planned for retirement, a fluctuating stock market, inflation and changing economy make insecurity a fact of life for most seniors.

"Only government can ultimately provide the security for old age," said James H. Schulz, a Brandeis University authority on pensions and the economic issues of aging.

Gov. James Blanchard said government needs to respond to the growing demands of seniors, the largest single group in the population.

He described older voters as people who have a "perspective of time and understand the problems of government."

MONEY IS seen as the limiting factor by directors of many of the agencies.

"We know what is needed to assist the older population, but are frustrated in our efforts to find adequate funding for our programs," said Audrey Wasserman, director of the Adult Well-Being Services in Detroit.

Although many agency directors agreed money is essential to running a satisfactory program, they also said money must be supplemented by time, energy, dedication and creativity.

Many said senior centers must learn to depend on themselves and look to other local institutions, resources and agencies for assistance — not just to state and national grants.

VICTORIA YOST, manager of Senior Facilities Services for the city of Southfield, said her extensive and successful program has had to learn how to welcome and incorporate the diverse needs of a large and varied ethnic population.

The "new generation of seniors" is more educated, more assertive and more willing to experiment. They request more creative programming, such as lectures, museum tours and computer courses, Yost said.

Karen Neuman of Birmingham, director of social work at the Southfield Rehabilitation Hospital, said that attending the conference "renewed her concern for the problem, because you need new enthusiasm in dealing with some of the seniors and some of the difficult cases you see."

The opportunity to learn of successful and innovative programming elsewhere in the state was valuable and inspiring, she said.

THE PROBLEMS of health care for the elderly require that our society focus on functional mobility, independence and self-help," said Roberta Cottman, assistant professor in the department of physical therapy at Wayne State University.

Women minorities in medical schools

AP — More women and minorities are enrolling at Michigan's medical schools, and officials say the trend is the result of an organized push to boost the numbers of minority doctors.

Women accounted for 41 percent of the medical students last year at Wayne State University's School of Medicine, and 49 percent of Michigan State University's College of Human Medicine.

"Our mission, since we were founded, is to provide opportunities for those who traditionally have been deprived of opportunities in the medical profession," said Peggy Kemp, a Michigan State spokeswoman.

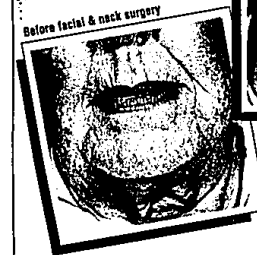
Last year, all four Michigan medical schools were above the national average of the number of minority medical students enrolled.

The trend was part of a nationwide pattern of increasing minority and women enrollment, according to an American Medical Association survey.

The study, conducted at 127 medical schools, revealed that women made up 34 percent of total medical school enrollment. Blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and other minorities accounted for nearly 30 percent of total enrollment.

Overall, however, medical school enrollment has declined as a result of more career options, officials said.

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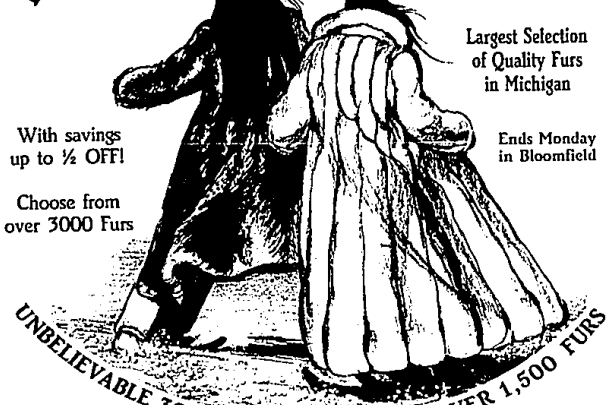
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