

Who will care for us in the future?

Health care might well be the only field of business where new technology in fact increases the need for labour force. As medical know-how increases, people whose conditions were previously deemed hopeless can now be treated successfully and treatment is tailored according to patients' individual qualities. Care is generally better and more effective than before, but it requires the collaboration of many highly educated experts.

However, an increasing discrepancy between the number of people in need of care and those who are able to provide it seems to be forming into a bottleneck for the realisation of care. The rate of ageing of the population in Finland is the second-fastest in the world, just behind Japan. The reason for this is our large post-war generation. In 1948, for instance, a total of 108 000 children were born, which is twice as much as today. These large generations are now entering retirement, which means that the need for health and social services will begin to increase. At present, the demographic dependency ratio, i.e., the ratio of people under 15 plus over 64 years of age and people aged 15–64 years is average among EU countries, but after only ten years it will be the highest.

Besides the low birth rate, reasons leading to this situation include lengthening lifetimes and continuous improvements to health and social conditions. This can be seen especially in the increasing number, both absolute and relative, of the very oldest of old people. According to population statistics, by 2030 there will be two and a half times as many old-age pensioners and over three times as many people aged 80 or more years than there are today, while the working population continues to shrink. Even now we have some remote areas in Finland where the annual birth rate is lower than the number of people retiring from the public sector. These areas have to compete for labour force with large population centres.

The Government Institute for Economic Research has calculated that if the modes of operation and the content of work in the health and social care sectors are not altered, more than one and a half times the number of employees will be needed in these sectors in 2040 than today due to the development of the population. This need will be impossible to meet both in terms of economy and the availability of employees. Elderly care in particular is going to face difficulties; in Southern Finland, for instance, there are health and social care educational institutions in which only a small percentage of students are planning to specialise in elderly care.

The ageing of the population is a challenge, but at the same time it must be regarded as evidence of our health and social care sector's success. Thanks to our high living standards and comprehensive services we live healthier – and longer. This is precisely what we have aimed for!

But how to rise to the challenge? According to the Government Institute for Economic Research, the present strength of the labour force in the social and health care sector will be suitable even in 2040, if the elderly's ability to function improves to correspond with that of people five years younger and if the productivity of work in social and health care sectors increases by one percent per year. Smart living environment technology has the potential to improve the elderly citizens' independent functionality, i.e., ability to function, and sophisticated electronic systems can be utilised for improving productivity.

In fact, technology is the only solution we have. Our status as a pioneer of ageing population also offers a unique opportunity for our information and communication technology innovators, because the whole world will age. Therefore we have to devote much more resources and energy to the research and development of care technology that would replace human labour force – to ensure our own well-being at old age as well.

Ilkka Winblad
Editor-in-Chief