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The consequences of age discrimination

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Ageism is a type of discrimination that involves prejudice against people based upon their age. Similar to racism and sexism, ageism involves holding negative stereotypes about people of different ages. The term ageism was coined by gerontologist, Robert N. Butler in 1968. He described ageism as discrimination toward older adults. Today, the term is often applied to any type of age-based discrimination, whether it involves prejudice against children, teenagers, adults or senior citizens.

Ageism is very common among health care professionals. Anti-aging bias may start early during medical training. Studies in medical profession that highlight ageism have been conducted; however, there is a gap in the literature concerning ageism among direct care workers. The data that is available currently comes from small, non-random study that means using convenient samples of health care professionals or students in a group of health professions. Aging inevitably involves an increased demand for healthcare services at some level and at some point for nearly every older American. Yet, any overview of the current state of elder healthcare resounds with disturbing data.

The effects of ageism go beyond just healthcare providers, with direct implications on the health of individuals who have ageist attitudes. Data from the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging on the ageist attitudes of 440 people ages 18 to 49 demonstrates that having negative stereotypes of older adults was associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease years later. In the study, 25 percent of people who held negative stereotypes had a heart attack 30 years later, and only 13 percent of people with positive views of the elderly suffered the same fate. Individuals' holding negative stereotypes of aging were less likely to fully recover from disability than those with positive stereotypes. Ageism may also impact memory in older individuals. Participants from the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Individuals who held more negative stereotypes about older adults had a 30 percent greater decline in their memory 40 years later, compared with people who viewed old age more favorably. Participants scored in the dementia range on a cognitive test when under stereotype threat, compared with 14 percent of test-takers not under the threat. Ageist attitudes have also been associated with hearing loss, diminished will to live, lower participation in preventive activities, lower perception of functional health, poor recovery after Acute Myocardial Infarction, and even reduced longevity.

Biography

Ramanakumar Anam completed his master's degree in Applied Gerontology from the University of North Texas in 2010. He is also a physician graduate from India. His research interests include study of human avatars to improve the quality of health care education for patients and providers, tobacco cessation, and ageism. In addition to his research, He has been working on developing medical multimedia, e-learning, and mobile platform based applications that could be used to bring positive lifestyle changes in veterans as well as other individuals in the community.