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HEALTH SERVICES FOR THE ELDERLY IN THAILAND

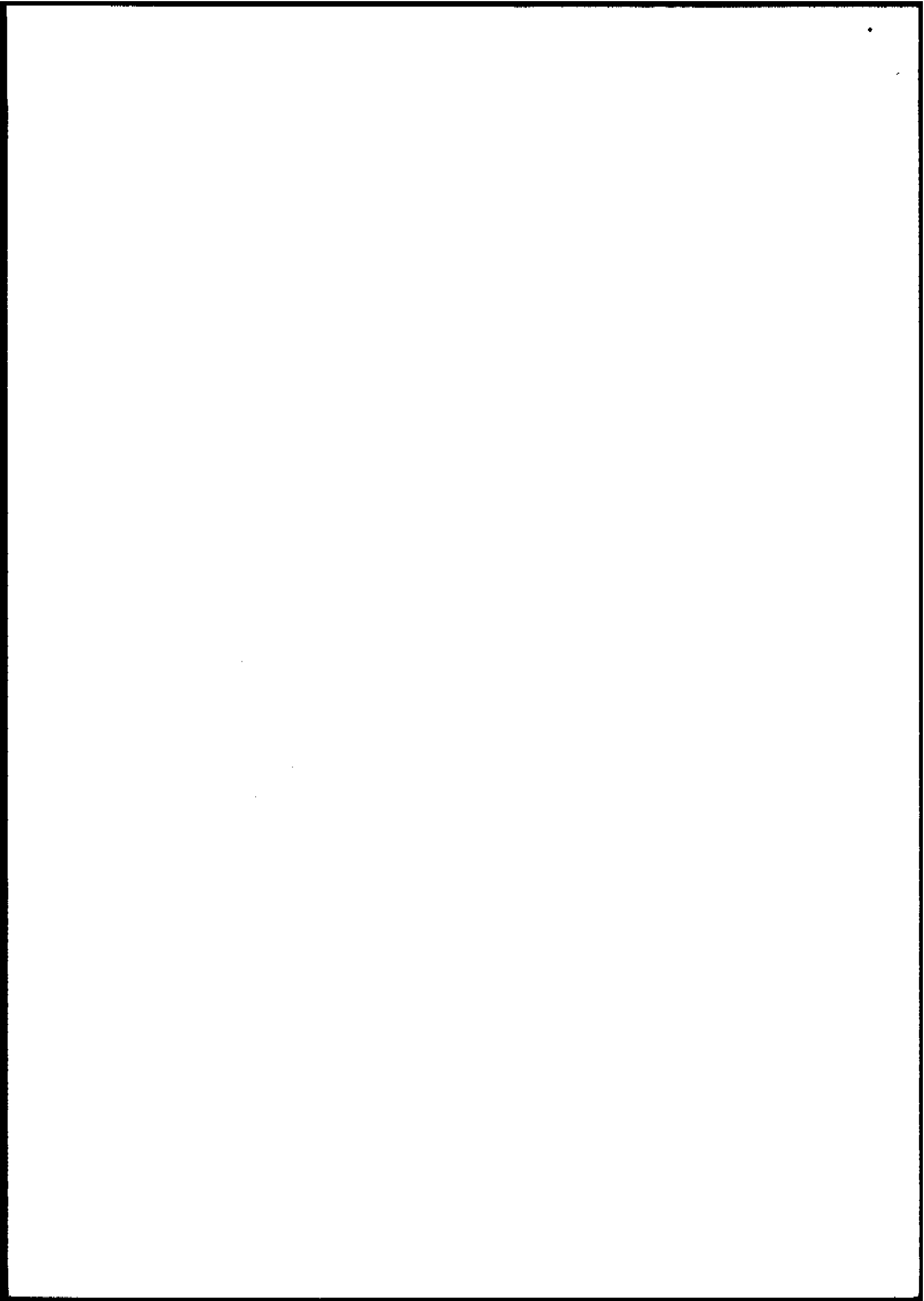
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## Health Care for the Elderly in Thailand

In the Thai culture persons of older age hold a position of special respect. It is considered the duty of the younger generations to reverence and support them. The failure to do so is a serious fault and sin. To abandon one's elder relatives is all but unthinkable and would be a source of shame to the offender. In the traditional and still predominant rural way of life in Thailand, the older members of family and community are well integrated into the society, playing active roles and having their needs met in turn by members of family, the extended family, and community. The majority of migrants from rural areas to Bangkok metropolis or other municipalities seem to continue these traditional values to a great extent.

Demographic trends in Thailand during the past 20 to 30 years seem to indicate an "ageing" of the population. The persons over 60 years of age have almost doubled in gross numbers over the past twenty years, a faster growth rate even than that of the rapidly increasing population as a whole. In 1979 there were more than 2 million people over 60 years old, representing a little over 4% of the total population. The population structure of Thailand, like other developing countries, is a young one. Over ½ of the population is less than 20 years of age, over 40% less than 15 years old, and almost 30% are children below 10 years of age. During at least the past ten years the fertility of reproductive population has shown a general downward trend which in the long run and in addition to a further reduction in mortality during the second half of life span of the Thai people, will result in a more rapid increase in the numbers of people over 60 compared to other age groups, and in a larger size of this group in

the population structure. With ageing of the population there is also noticed in Thailand an increasing rate of survival of women over men of about 20%. Although this trend is substantial in the Thai population, it does not seem to be a public health significance over the next twenty years. Therefore, it is expected that most of the needs of older generations can be met by supporting traditional values of self care, family care, and community care; and by strengthened and improved social and health care systems which are organized and managed to properly support and provide special services to all elderly in families and communities.

What are the problems and needs of the population over 60 in Thailand at the present time and in the next twenty years for which national action is needed? Old age is not itself a disability, a disease, or cause of death. The majority of older persons retain their functional capabilities, especially mental and verbal, in spite of physiological changes and a decline in physical functions. In Thailand it is customary eventhough compulsory for government and other salaried employees to retire from work at age 60. This reflects the Thai culture and custom surrounding the stages of the life cycle. In the agricultural life , the aged are also relieved of the burden of heavy work at an advanced age. But this need not mean the end of their socially and economically productive lives in society where strong family and community ties are maintained. In accord with our "health for all" policy the social, economic, and health needs of this group will be provided for equitably through close coordination and collaboration of health, social, and welfare service systems of the government in support of self-help and family and community based self reliance and determination.

Unfortunately, information on mortality and morbidity in this age specific group is missing. People over 60 are also not a homogeneous segment. Most elderly are generally healthy, both physically and mentally, but may have social, occupational, or economic problems. The different needs of elderly in rural and urban settings are not clearly understood, particularly in areas where rapid social, technological, and economic changes are taking place. From the medical point of view the elderly do face some rather special problems in addition to the need for health protection in the broad sense. Their extended life span means that chronic diseases start to emerge and may affect several organs at the same time. Increasing physical frailty means they may as a group be more sensitive to environmental changes and medicinal drugs. In Thailand where 99% of the elderly are living in their own family and community settings, it would seem necessary to develop integrated health care, social, and welfare system to support primary health care scheme for preserving the highest possible standard of life for them by assisting the elderly in maintaining good health; and in keeping an alert, active, and purposeful life. The answers to health and social problems of elderly do not lie in institutionalization or dependency on assistance of the government, but rather in ensuring that the elderly have access to prevention and care in active social settings of the family and community.

Developing this support for the countries' increasing elderly population will require multidisciplinary and intersectoral planning, coordination and cooperation in providing a wide range of alternatives for care, using and improving existing specialized services such as secondary and tertiary medical care facilities, and finding innovative ways to strengthen

and support individual and family self-reliance and active involvement in social life. The development of these goals will certainly require studies on physical, mental, and social profiles of the elderly in Thailand; training of health and related manpower in the care of elderly; strengthening of health, welfare, and social institution which can provide needed services; and the development of community oriented approaches to integrate care for the elderly into primary health care scheme and into systems for social and economic assistance.

For Thailand, we have only just begun. The government policy has recognized the vulnerability of the very young children under five years of age, and of the people over sixty. A program of free medical care for these groups is being gradually introduced and augmented. At present Thailand has several Homes for the Aged under the Department of Public Welfare. Training programme on care for the elderly has been organized by Ministry of Public Health for the development of related knowledge and skills for health personnel at all levels. General hospitals are encouraged to render special care for the aged by setting up geriatric units. There is also in Thailand, an association of the elderly which voluntarily provides, at a limited scale, health education and care services to the old people. However, there has as yet been no systematic study of the health needs and care for the elderly. Such information are much needed to provide a sound basis for policy and plan formulation on an intersectoral basis. Demonstration and training projects are needed to develop models for family and community based care using primary health care as a key approach. For the near future Thailand has suggested a set of related activities to be

carried out in collaboration with WHO. They are: 1) an epidemiological study of health situation of the elderly, 2) strategy development for integration of health care for the elderly into basic health services and primary health care, 3) development of mechanism for coordination of related activities being carried out by both public and private sectors, 4) strengthening of training programme for health and related personnel in gerontology and geriatrics, 5) setting up of demonstration and training centers in community based services for the elderly, and 6) technical support to various medical institutions for strengthening geriatric and gerontology programs. All of these steps would envisage care of the elderly as an integral part of our national policy and strategy development for health for all, and of our aim to maintain the elderly population as an integral and respected part of our social life. In this way, Thailand can both conserve its cultural values of respect and support for the older generations, and also meet more effectively the challenge of health for all by preserving and using their capabilities to contribute to the nation's well being and development.

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