

## ABSTRACT

# THE UTILIZATION OF PRIMARY HEALTH CARE SERVICES AMONG THE ELDERLY IN BARBADOS

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This study addresses the issue of the utilization of primary health care services among the elderly in Barbados and focuses on the polyclinics. These decentralized health care facilities were established in the 1970's in the thrust to place greater emphasis on primary health care.

Many problems emerged at the polyclinics, including overcrowding and long periods of waiting. Moreover, health providers observed that much of the physician's time was devoted to persons with minor non-critical health problems. These developments brought into critical focus questions relating to the appropriate use of these health care services.

The questions included:

1. Is there a relationship between utilization and service accessibility?
2. Have the elderly abandoned the traditional use of home remedies?
3. What help-seeking behaviour patterns, if any, do elderly persons exhibit?
4. How much use is made of the lay-referral system (Freidson:1970) before seeking medical help?
5. Are polyclinics being utilized appropriately?

As help-seeking behaviour affects the utilization of primary health care services in Barbados, this study examines both factors. Its objectives are to: (1) Describe and critically analyze the health system of Barbados since 1937; (2) Critically review studies on help-seeking behaviour and utilization of health services. (3) Identify and describe the help-seeking behaviour patterns found among the elderly; (4) Discover whether elderly polyclinic users have abandoned the traditional use of home remedies; (5) Determine if there is an association between accessibility and utilization of the polyclinics; and (6) Gain theoretical insights regarding help-seeking behaviour and the utilization of health services not currently available.

The main hypothesis of the study is that the utilization of the polyclinic general practice service by elderly persons in Barbados is predicated on the accessibility of the primary health care facilities.

Data were collected by means of questionnaires administered to 500 polyclinic users and observations were made systematically of the eight (8) polyclinics to determine how services were utilized.

It was found that: (1) The elderly have abandoned the traditional use of home remedies characteristic of Barbadian society; (2) The majority of health problems presented to physicians are minor and non-critical; (3) The elderly utilize the polyclinics primarily to socialize and to manage their loneliness and isolation at home; (4) The majority of the elderly expressed the preference for home care rather than institutional care; and (5) There is a significant association between accessibility and utilization of the polyclinics.

It may be concluded from this study that there is a need to: (1) develop more refined strategies to address the social needs of the elderly; and, (2) to facilitate more appropriate use of polyclinics as primary health care facilities.