

Prevention is Better than Cure

In Lebanon there are no more than ten doctors specialized in Geriatric medicine. Dr. Thuraya Arayssi is the only Geriatric specialist at the American University Medical Center (AUB - MC). She is also a specialist in Internal Medicine and Rheumatology. This interview took place in her office at AUB - MC.

Myriam Sfeir: Where did you complete your specialties and why did you choose Geriatrics?

Dr. Thuraya Arayssi: I did my Geriatrics specialty at the University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, and I pursued work in Rheumatology at the National Institutes of Health in Washington DC. The field of geriatrics is underserved and very few people know about it. At this point research in this area is still in its infantile stages. I think one can contribute a great deal to one's patients and to the community by conducting studies and research along these lines. As we grow older, the way diseases present themselves change, so we need to study that to be able to give better care to our patients. I believe that every physician needs to develop expertise in geriatrics, for whatever specialty one chooses one is bound to have older people among his/her patients.

MS: How does geriatric medicine differ from other specialties and what are its objectives?

TA: The most important thing to know is that unlike other specialties, geriatrics is not organ oriented. Let me explain that further. When you specialize in cardiology you are a specialist in diseases of the heart. Moreover, if you opt for gastroenterology you are a specialist in the diseases of the gastro intestinal system. In geriatrics there isn't a single organ system that you are involved in, it is more of a holistic approach to a human being and to a patient. Geriatric medicine does not only seek to cure diseases, but to prevent them by striving to educate (instruct) people on how to age successfully. The concept of successful aging is something very important nowadays. Geriatric medicine basically attempts to answer questions related to how we age, how our aging interfaces with the environment and with the community and what we, as physicians can do to promote the health of the aging population.

MS: What are the ailments mostly encountered by geriatric physicians?

TA: I believe that it is very important for us to start differentiating between diseases and natural aging. As we age many of the disorders that we suffer from, although they accompany the aging process, are in fact minimally due to old age and more related to environmental exposure and to how well we have managed to care of ourselves. For example we start losing muscle power because we didn't exercise well, we start having lung problems because we smoked.

Many people assume that the health problems they are suffering from are the result of aging. For example, some elderly take it for granted that forgetting things and losing one's memory is not a problem since it is part of the aging process. This is a misconception, for even though losing one's memory or dementia is one of the common problems the older adult may suffer from, not all dementias are irreversible. Therefore, we cannot always presume that if somebody is 70 years old and has started to forget things is part of normal aging.

Other conditions that we deal with are recurrent falling, urinary incontinence, depression and so on. As far as the latter condition goes, it is well known that prevalence of depression is much more common in older adults than in younger ones.

All these ailments are dealt with in collaboration with other medical specialties. For instance cases of dementia are treated in collaboration with the neurologist and the psychiatrist, urinary incontinence in collaboration with the gynecologist and the urologist, depression with the psychiatrist. So this again tells you that this is a holistic approach to the patient where we do not presume that we are specialists in one particular organ.

MS: Do people know about geriatric medicine? Are the patients you treat mostly men or women?

TA: Unfortunately, most people are unaware of the existence of this specialty. Yet, this is not surprising because this is

