

EDUCATION



In about 15 years, seniors will make up just over 20 percent of the population and that means more health-care work for (clockwise from left) hearing-aid practitioner Jennifer Abbott, osteopath Dickson Wong, and physiotherapist Julie Berezziak.

With seniors come new jobs

An aging-population boom is a boon for health-care careers that focus on old folks

When he was a little boy, Dickson Wong wanted to become a doctor. The Vancouver native was enrolled in premed courses at UBC eight years ago when a story in a men's fitness magazine not only piqued his interest but altered his career path.

The article was about osteopathy. A treatment that draws on massage, acupressure, chiropractic, and naturopathic medicine, it involves manual palpation and manipulation to prevent and treat disease. The practice is based on the philosophy that the body, mind, and soul are inseparable.

Within two months of reading the article, Wong was getting ready to fly to Australia to study the treatment.

"I liked how it was more holistic, how it used the natural healing powers of the body, compared to using pharmaceuticals," Wong says in a phone interview. "That's what I wanted to do with medicine to begin with."

Now an osteopathic practitioner, Wong heads the Holistic MediZen clinic in Burnaby. There, he treats everything from back pain to head-aches to fatigue.

Some of Wong's clients are seniors, many of whom tend to have chronic health conditions.

"A lot of seniors have trouble in their hips; they may have had hip surgery," Wong explains. "Many have suffered with pain for a long time. They're so grateful when they show improvement." (Although Wong studied abroad, the Toronto-based Canadian College of Osteopathy has a Vancouver campus. The five-year, part-time program consists of supervised clinical practice as well as an additional year of independent study devoted to a research-based thesis.)

Treating seniors provides more than just job satisfaction for health-care practitioners like Wong. While the economic downturn has resulted in cutbacks and job losses for some, career opportunities in the health-care field abound because of the aging population.

Statistics Canada predicts that by 2026, when many baby boomers will have retired, seniors will make up 21.2 percent of the population. That figure will climb to 26.4 by 2051.

"There is a window of opportunity to train the next generation of medical professionals before the baby boomers begin making their greatest demands on the system," notes demographer David K. Foot in a 2008 paper written for the Institute for Research on Public Policy.

According to Statistics Canada's most recent labour-force survey, released earlier this month, health care and social assistance were among the industries with the fastest rates of growth since July 2009, up 6.2 percent. (Construction was another.)

Working with seniors in the health-care field was a natural choice for Julie Berezziak. After nearly two decades spent working as a television editor, she went to UBC to study physiotherapy. Now in private practice, Berezziak specializes in treating people over the age of 55 and loves it.

"I had a grandma who was everything to me," Berezziak says in a phone interview. "I'll never forget the relationship I had with her...I didn't go into physio to help seniors; I was going to work with athletes. But they're really a neglected age group...I'm happiest there."

The most common problem she sees is osteoarthritis in the knees and hips. Berezziak treats whiplash, stiffness, and other aches and pains, as well as helping older men and women strengthen their muscles and improve their posture.

"There's a sense of well-being, a psychological relief," Berezziak says of the benefits her clients get from physical therapy. "There's also a sense of accomplishment."

"More and more physios are treating seniors," she adds. "But don't decide to do it if you want to make millions. You have to get into it because you like it."

Besides the opportunity to tap into a huge market, job security and a flexible schedule were other reasons

Jennifer Abbott decided to pursue a career that involved addressing the health needs of seniors. The mother of one gave up working as a flight attendant and retrained in order to become a hearing-aid practitioner.

The North Shore resident completed the hearing-aid practitioner program at Edmonton's Grant MacEwan University via distance education. This past spring she launched her own business, Hear at Home Mobile Hearing Clinic.

She goes to people's homes and tests their hearing, advises clients on hearing aids and assistive listening devices, and provides follow-up care as well as "good old-fashioned customer service."

"I wanted a family-friendly job," Abbott explains by phone. "I didn't even know what a hearing-aid practitioner was, but I kept getting drawn to it."

According to Abbott, about 50 percent of those over 60 can expect to have hearing problems in their lifetime. On average, people wait seven years before seeking help with their hearing.

B.C. has a shortage of hearing-aid practitioners like her. The Justice Institute of British Columbia—which offers paramedic programs among other health-care courses—is exploring the possibility of offering a diploma program in the subject here.

Working for herself means Abbott sets her own hours and she's "not stuck in an office." But there are other rewards, like witnessing how, when people get their hearing back, they get their life back.

"The best part of my job is seeing people experience an improvement in their hearing for themselves," she explains. "So often people are adamant they don't have hearing loss, that they don't need a hearing aid. They worry it will make them look old. I recently had a client who was adamant she didn't want a hearing aid. She tried it, and now she loves it. She says she can hear her family talking to her. She has a soft-spoken friend, and she can hear her talk. She can hear the birds outside. That's the best part of my job, hearing stories like that....It improves people's quality of life." ♦

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