

## **SENIOR HOUSING OF THE FUTURE**

### **The social environment of seniors and services supporting their independence**

#### **ABSTRACT**

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The aim of this study is to describe the social environment of seniors and services supporting a barrier-free environment and the social independence of seniors, and to describe a service model that combines them. The study is based on a survey of the present situation and on theme interviews. The target group of the study consisted of seniors in Finland and in Japan and experts on work among the elderly care in the cities. The target cities were Kajaani, Tampere, Sapporo and Sendai. Japan was chosen as the international target of the study, as both Japan and Finland are countries with rapidly aging population structures, and as, on the other hand, the Finns and the Japanese already collaborate in developing the services of seniors. The study is a qualitative interview-based survey. The approach chosen was theme interviews, which were carried out individually as well as in groups. The research material was accumulated in four localities in 2004 and 2005 through interviews of seniors over 65 years of age (n = 18) and experts on work among the elderly (n = 28). All the seniors who participated were independent and fairly well-functioning and needed very few assistive devices. A few used safety phones, walking or hearing aids or walking sticks.

The study confirmed that today's seniors in Finland as well as in Japan are content with very little and consume few services. Contacts with family and friends are the carrying force. Living at home is supported by a barrier-free environment and the familiar things that create a feeling of security. IT technology is not among them; it is at future seniors' disposal. Family members, one's own home, friends and long-term home caregiver relations were felt to be important and safe. The possibility for a long-time home caregiver should be ensured, as this person generates a feeling of security and continuity in seniors' lives. As long as a senior is physically fit, moving outside the home is no problem, and these seniors do move outdoors and participate in many kinds of exercising and cultural activities outside the home.

The atmosphere and services of the residential area should be made so attractive that they for their part support the seniors' spontaneous maintenance of their own functional ability and the possibilities to keep in touch with one another. Barrier-free homes and environment are the cornerstones. No seniors should be confined in their own homes. Stairs, platforms and lack of elevators are great obstacles to social contacts in both countries. Even seniors with weaker mobility would venture outside the home, if adequate places to rest and their location could be ascertained. Seniors as well as people of all ages need a larger number of small, well-designed park areas and communal meeting-places near their homes.

Supporting contacts and interaction between generations was also regarded as important in the future. Communality as a subject taught in schools might generate fruitful, far-reaching interaction between young people and seniors: special senior days, culture, folk tradition, newspaper sessions, singing together, outdoor activities etc. Another significant point raised by experts is retirement and the ensuing separation from colleagues. For many seniors, colleagues have been the most meaningful contacts. When working life is over, there is a vast empty gap. The options should be positive and appreciative, without a cachet of old age. Voluntary work and peer services are of great significance and should be supported.

Both seniors and experts regard technology and aging as compatible if the technology stems from the senior's own needs and enhances coping at home and security. At its best, technology extends the possibility to live at home and makes it possible for the senior to maintain contacts and get help. Yet, technology does not necessarily eliminate loneliness or the feeling of it. Technology should not be a stamper or conspicuous.

The views of seniors and experts converged in many respects. Still, the seniors lived more in this day and were not able to picture the options of the future or did not find any new forms necessary. Apart from one interviewee, all wished to live at home, or in the conditions they were living in at the time of the interview, for as long as possible, and to have easy access to services and consultation in one and the same place. The views of the experts were more future-oriented and they pondered upon options and possibilities for

improvements. The seniors of the future were seen as active consumers of services, who nevertheless should be entitled to get services easily and effortlessly from the same place. The interviews of seniors and experts indicated the same as the survey of the present situation: there is a wide range of diverse services available to older people, but there is no quarter to co-ordinate them. Even emergency centres are unnecessarily burdened by seniors looking for services. There are also many services the seniors are not aware of. They should have one fixed phone number for consultation and guidance and orders for services supporting their independence. A good co-ordination centre requires co-operation between the public and private sectors as well as networking and development of technology.

Key words: senior, social environment, independent living, supporting independence, service model, senior services, barrier free.

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