

Many caregivers to elderly suffer health woes themselves: Study

Researchers call for eldercare leave at all workplaces, more awareness of caregiver training

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A significant proportion of caregivers to older adults face health problems themselves, and this may affect their ability to perform caregiving tasks, such as lifting a frail senior from bed to wheelchair.

Their health issues may also make them more vulnerable to the challenges and stresses that come with caregiving, said Assistant Professor Rahul Malhotra, principal investigator of a new study on caregivers to those aged 75 and older.

And despite the Covid-19 pandemic triggering widespread work-from-home arrangements, two years after the pandemic started, there was only a marginal increase in the proportion of caregivers whose workplaces had such flexi-place work arrangements, said Dr Malhotra, who is head of research at the Centre for Ageing Research and Education (Care) at the Duke-NUS Medical School.

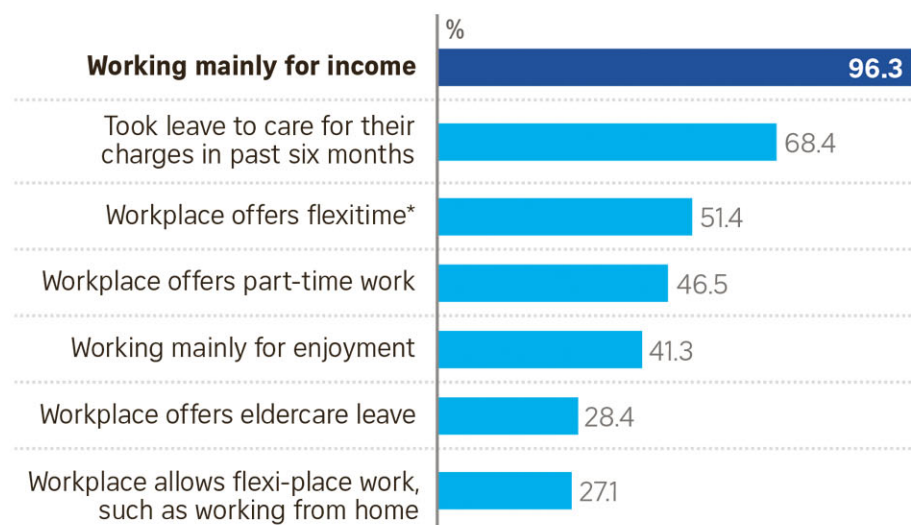
He said that the research studied caregivers of those aged 75 and older, as this group of seniors is the most rapidly growing segment of the older adult population in Singapore and globally.

Many of these older adults also need help with at least one activity of daily living, such as bathing or dressing.

The Caregiving Transitions Among Family Caregivers of Elderly Singaporeans (TraCE) study interviewed 278 people who are the main caregivers to a family member. It was published on Care's website in March.

Unlike most studies on caregivers here, the TraCE study is a longitudinal one that tracks its subjects

Caregivers who work full time



*Flexitime arrangements allow employees to work different hours from their colleagues while fulfilling the required number of work hours a day.

Source: CENTRE FOR AGEING RESEARCH AND EDUCATION SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

over time, as the health and caregiving responsibilities of those interviewed changed over the years, Dr Malhotra said.

He added: "In a country whose population is rapidly ageing, it is important to study family caregivers of older adults, to inform policies and practices focusing on, and benefiting, them and their older care recipients."

The study found that the average age of caregivers is 62 years. Almost three in four caregivers are women.

A total of 73 per cent of the caregivers are children or children-in-law of the person they are looking after, while 23 per cent are spouses. The rest include siblings and grandchildren.

About one in three of the caregivers have never been married.

Other key findings of the study include:

- Some 58 per cent of caregivers have two or more chronic conditions, such as

hypertension, joint pain and diabetes, and 26 per cent have mobility difficulties. Forty per cent rated their health as fair or poor, and 26 per cent said they had depressive symptoms.

- About one in four caregivers cared for their loved one alone, without help from any other person.
- Caregivers spent an average of 33 hours a week on caregiving, which is almost as long as the hours spent on a full-time job.
- Caregivers have spent an average of 10 years looking after their loved one who needs care.
- Only 5 per cent of caregivers had attended any caregiver training. Only 38 per cent were aware of the Caregivers Training Grant, an annual subsidy of \$200 for caregivers to attend approved courses to better care for their loved ones.
- Half of the non-spousal caregivers were working. Of all the working caregivers, regardless of their relationship

to the person they care for, only 28 per cent were entitled to eldercare leave.

Dr Malhotra said that most of the baseline interviews for the study were done before February 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit Singapore.

An analysis of the data collected, in follow-up interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022, found that up to 35 per cent of caregivers who are working full time had access to flexi-place work arrangements.

This is a marginal increase from the percentage before the pandemic struck.

Dr Malhotra said the marginal increase could be reflective of the nature of work performed by these caregivers. For example, many of them may be working in workplaces or roles requiring in-person attendance.

The study did not ask the caregivers about the nature of their work, or the industry that they were in.

Dr Malhotra noted that 44 per cent of caregivers working full time had only secondary education or below, and their educational qualifications had a critical bearing on their jobs and the nature of their work.

Only 27 per cent of caregivers worked in companies that offer eldercare leave. This is typically two days of parentcare leave a year, in addition to the staff's leave entitlement.

The study called for state support to implement eldercare leave in all workplaces, to help caregivers better juggle their multiple responsibilities.

"It may help to normalise the use of such leave so that employees are not hesitant to take them, since it would be a perk available at all workplaces," Dr Malhotra added.

"One would have to consider the cost of such leave for employers, and therefore, it may be useful for the state to step in and support employers in offering eldercare leave, at least for an interim period."

He pointed out that the low awareness of caregiver training programmes and related grants points to the need to raise awareness on the topic.

Dr Malhotra said that in a rapidly ageing population with a large percentage of caregivers who are working, it is imperative to have caregiver-friendly work policies to help them better juggle their different responsibilities.

This, he added, is especially so since caregivers play a central role in providing long-term care to their older family members.

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