

Ministerial Conference on Ageing
of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)
in Berlin, 11 to 13 September 2002

Plenary Session on 12 September 2002 – General Debate
on behalf of
the accredited non-governmental organizations

Statement by Prof. M. Gutman, PhD, International Association of Gerontology

Topic: Access to health care and education and training of primary health care workers regarding older persons

Chairman and Ministers:

The over 1000 NGOs who met in Madrid in April, 2002 at the time of the 2nd World Assembly on Ageing represented a broad cross-section of civil society , including professional as well as grass-roots organizations. It is indeed an honour to speak on their behalf about the second of the three priority directions in the Plan of Action: advancing health and well being in old age and in particular, about access to health care and the role of education and training of primary health care workers regarding older persons.

The demographic success of ageing brings with it a number of challenges. For a significant proportion of older people combinations of different serious disease processes accompany old age and the treatment of each condition is complicated by the presence of others. This "multiple pathology" plus the atypical presentation of disease is at the core of the knowledge base for medicine in old age. Combine this with the social constructs around ageing and ill health or disability as well as the importance of the diagnostic and therapeutic environment (i.e. access to health care) it becomes clear that education and training are key components.

For all but the most sick, medical and social care should be provided within primary care and in a domestic setting. For an increasing number of older people however their lives are also blighted by violence and neglect. Within the above paradigm key issues are:

- Education of older people themselves to empower them in issues concerned with health, well- being and the promotion of active ageing.
- Education of family and other informal care givers.
- Education and training of students in all the health- and social-care fields about ageing, prevention and management of age related conditions and the concepts of active ageing and the life course approach -i.e. promote positive attitudes of ageing across the lifespan

- Education and training of primary health care workers with this same knowledge base plus the importance of a patient centred and patient friendly primary care environment.
- Education of specialists in geriatric medicine and geriatric psychiatry and other health professionals to train and support primary health care workers.