

*There is no right or wrong way to approach aging. However, those who stay active, engaged and independent are generally happier, less of a worry for their families and more likely to maintain their quality of life.*

# Aging: *Will rehab help?*

By Audrey Miller, MSW, RSW, CCRC

**A**s a rehabilitation counsellor who works with disabled individuals and their families, I know that a disability can occur at any age or at any time in a person's life. But age itself is not a disability.

Someone is not old and "going down the hill" just because she has had her 65th birthday. The actual process of aging is gradual and is a different experience for each person. A person may find that she is suddenly unable to perform little tasks, such as twisting a lid to open a jar. Activities that she may have quickly done independently now require assistance. For instance, mom may no longer be able to shop, carry groceries home or safely cook a meal; dad may find it too tiring to mow the lawn or take out the garbage.

## **Maximizing ability**

Can rehab help an aging person maintain their independence? Yes! We commonly associate rehabilitation with injury; for instance, we think of the physiotherapy someone receives after fracturing a limb to improve the strength and mobility of the limb. However, the goal of all rehabilitation, which is to maintain or maximize function, can also be applied to aging.

While the goal of rehabilitation with an older person is the same as for an injured person, the means may be different. For example, a physiotherapist can assist with designing an activation program or a dietician can review a person's dietary needs to assess how well the person is maintaining their nutritional requirements. Another rehabilitation approach can be based on maintaining or improving functional levels through modifying the environment (see *The safer, the better*), rather than purely following a medical model of care.

Intervention with the elderly focuses on ways

## **The safer, the better**

An in-home safety assessment is a good start to improve home safety. An assessment might identify that the use of an automatic shut-off kettle or the use of a microwave rather than a stove would address a few safety issues within the kitchen. Reorganizing cupboards so that they can be safely accessed – without the user bending or reaching or standing on a stool – may be another smart strategy. The installation of grab bars in the bathroom or removal of scatter rugs is yet another suggestion for improving safety within the home.

to minimize disability and improve function. Helping someone live safely at home by bringing in services and supports is one way to maintain maximum activity. In this context, rehabilitation takes on a social and community focus. Keeping the person safe and independent is a primary goal, and community services—whether publicly or privately funded—that hold the same philosophy should be accessed.

## **Being proactive**

Inherent in the process of aging is a decline in function of some parts of our bodies. For instance, we may not see, hear, remember or walk as well as we once did. We need to understand the etiology of the decline on a medical level and obtain medical treatment and social support as needed.

**Overall, rehabilitation intervention by a proactive team of professionals can help aging clients improve their daily function and continue to enjoy their independence. ●**

*Audrey Miller, MSW, RSW, CCRC, is the Managing Director of Elder Caring Inc. She can be reached at [amiller@eldercaring.ca](mailto:amiller@eldercaring.ca)*