

Leading by Example



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It's being billed as this country's "silver tsunami." Though imperceptible at the moment, the population increase of elderly persons during the next few decades is projected to be nothing short of staggering. The first baby boomer filed for Social Security retirement benefits last October; a rather innocuous event by itself, but one that signals the start of something big: During the next two decades, nearly 80 million Americans will become eligible for Social Security benefits. That's more than 10,000 per day. And it won't be long before baby boomers will be retiring at an increasingly higher rate than people entering the workforce. Is our nation's health care system ready for such a dramatic shift in need?

The demand for health care and housing services among the elderly is on the rise, and I suspect there aren't too many people who think we're currently ready to handle what lies ahead. But that doesn't mean an appropriate response is out of reach. The topic of this issue's special section is about preparing ourselves for serving America's increasingly aging population. Our authors have spent considerable time addressing such critical issues as culture change, geriatric medicine, pain control, quality of care, and health system strategies for serving the elderly.

I've been hearing more and more that caring for our nation's aging population is where the Catholic health ministry can show the way. I hope the articles herein will inspire and help our colleagues toward that end. As Fr. Myles Sheehan writes in his article titled, "A New Vision for an Aging Population" (starting on page 18), persons charged with caring for the elderly "need to be stewards of the lives of those who live in these communities, and create the opportunities to allow those lives to be full." And in this regard, the Catholic health ministry, ever seeking to continue Jesus' mission of love and healing, is well-positioned to lead by example.