

Falls prevention in elderly by elderly in Slovenia

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Most injuries among the elderly, often with serious or devastating health and social consequence, are caused by falls. In Slovenia the number of falls among older people is increasing. Circumstances of falls are numerous, they can occur in all environments and their causes and courses are always individual. Many falls among the elderly can be prevented. Due to frequency of falls professional staff is not able to prevent them in all environments. Wider prevention can be achieved with the assistance of trained multipliers in the framework of primary “popular” prevention.

The Slovenian Anton Trstenjak Institute of gerontology and intergenerational relations (Institute), due to great interest on falls in its basic programme “Partnership of Primary Prevention for the 3rd generation” (PPP for 3), has created a fall reduction programme among the elderly. It is based on the principle, that primary prevention should be understood by everybody and to be implemented in all environments. Therefore it is necessary to include unused potentials of the older generation and intergenerational cooperation. To achieve this goal, the Institute, during the period from September 2010 to June 2011, carried out a pilot programme of falls reduction within the method of social learning in groups that was moderated by multipliers. In the spirit of the Institute activities, multipliers represent upgrade of volunteer activities, to which can join representatives of all adult generations and social background.

For many years, the Institute has been training individuals from different generational and social milieus for volunteer activities and group leadership. More than 2000 volunteers - from each part of the social gradient - have already completed their education and are included in a network of voluntary associations across the country under the supervision of the Institute. Among them 66 individuals of various ages and education level with volunteer experience volunteered to take part in the additional education to be trained as knowledge and awareness multipliers on falls among the elderly.

The Institute has prepared for them a special “popular” handbook on the causes, consequences and prevention of falls, where also a chapter on exercises for balance maintaining is included. The training of multipliers took place at the Institute in February 2011. At the end of the course, the participants underwent a test on their knowledge of falls and a practical test on correctly performing exercises for balance. The participants were paired and each pair recruited a group from 8 to 12 elderly people in their local environment. In this way, 33 groups in different environments throughout Slovenia were formed, together involving 261 elderly individuals, each group consisting of participants with different educational and social background. All participants received an easy understandable booklet on falls, created for the course by the Institute. The booklet served as a basis for group work and the participants also put in it their observations, comments and suggestions. Each group held at least eight meetings during the period from March 2011 to June 2011. Both moderators moderated the meetings in a way that fits in the specific local environment and spread knowledge and falls prevention awareness.

At the meetings all members on equal basis actively discussed on falls and their prevention, and everybody also performed exercises for balance. At the end of the programme, each multiplier prepared a written diploma in which he/she described and evaluated his/her work with a group. The diplomas were presented to multiplier-colleagues and representatives of the Institute. The training was completed with the handing out of multiplier certificates. In autumn 2011 the multipliers will begin with raising awareness in new groups of elderly people, while the Institute will start with the training of new multipliers, who have not participated in the former group. There is a lot of interest for this type of education among volunteers.

The analyses of the written diplomas of multipliers and of the impressions of participants show, that there is prevailing opinion on both sides, that the knowledge of falls is indispensable, if we wish to reduce their frequency and that this knowledge is very limited, because before the course they have not known a lot about the falls. After the course they are more aware of the dangers that could lead to a fall in their environment and residences. They wish to participate in a revision course every year. They were enthusiastic about group work, about the equality of the relationship, friendly atmosphere and the participation of younger multipliers, who also enjoyed working with the elderly. Many groups have decided to continue with the meetings and suggest that similar procedure should be used for other topics that are important for the elderly. The majority of proposals were in the field of diet and healthy life style, intergenerational relations, memory training and dementia.

Social and educational differences did not have important influence on group atmosphere. Participants with lower education were open for the new knowledge and satisfied with balance-exercises, while higher educated participants showed more interest on achieving higher safety level. Within groups educational difference also did not influence the spontaneity of social learning. At local level social differences could possibly have different relations if compared to the average statistical outcomes?

The pilot project on falls reduction with active participation of each participant was for the Institute a way to test its method of work. At the end of the course it can reasonably be claimed, that the method is an appropriate basis for the implementation of a national plan on fall prevention, as well as for broader projects on falls among the elderly. At the same time it has opened some new questions regarding social difference. Work in popular primary prevention will continue and the Institute will try to find the appropriate opportunities.

Basic data about the Institute:

Anton Trstenjak (1906 – 1996), member of The Slovenian Academy for Science and Arts, was one of most prominent Slovenian psychologists with the main interest in intergenerational relations and social gerontology. In 1992, with his favourite disciples, he founded the Institute (with the Academy as cofounder) of psychology, logotherapy and anthropohygiene, which has been nominated by him after his death. In 2004 the Slovenian government decided to be the Institute's cofounder as well and Institute became national in the area of its activities. The main areas of Institute's interest are gerontology and intergenerational relations, addiction, anthropology, anthropohygiene and logotherapy. The Institute has been creating social network of quality ageing and intergenerational relations. Together with the development of intergenerational centres, it has completed the research about the standpoints, needs and potentials of Slovenian 50+ population; in cooperation with WHO it is coordinating Age-friendly movement in Slovenia and is active in popular primary prevention and prevention of alcohol dependency.