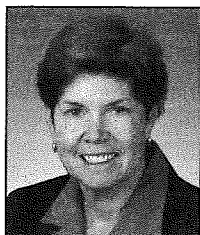


Lingering health care debt is No. 1 cause of bankruptcies for seniors

I see it all the time. Children of aging parents deny the imperative for their own long-term planning. It's so easy to postpone it to another time. What can't be denied is the ever-increasing *cost* of age-related health problems.



Mary Peters

Lingering health care debt is the No. 1 cause of bankruptcies for the aged. But chronic illnesses and broken hips are not the only financial issues facing them.

As people age, they often downsize. They move from large homes to smaller ones — even a condo or apartment. They hire caregivers to stay at home, but their increasing care needs might make that unaffordable. So, they reluctantly choose an assisted living facility, or if medical needs require it, a skilled nursing facility.

The cost of care keeps rising. MetLife Mature Market Institute research organization reported that rates at assisted living facilities are over \$37,000 annually and the cost of a private room in a nursing home is over \$79,000. The average cost for a nonmedical caregiver is \$20 per hour. At any point, we can run out of money.

Meanwhile, the millions of baby boomers begin turning 65 next year. We will likely live longer than our parents because of medical advances, and we will need even more long-term care and housing.

It's difficult to predict how these issues will impact us. One thing is certain: We need to think about and plan for them. Those of us in our 50s and 60s need to ask ourselves: Where will we live? (With the kids?) And how much money will we need? With a plan in place, we ensure that our quality of life will be equal to our lifestyles to which we are accustomed. It's hard to know where to start.

To begin planning, let's gaze into two crystal balls. The first holds the adult children's input. We know that we might be dependent upon their help. So, start the conversation with them about housing and medical options. If we don't move in with them,

will we go to a facility? A new option to consider is to group with peers and help each other live more independently as we age.

The communal living idea intrigues me. An intentional community might be a few friends who decide to buy land to develop into a neighborhood that will suit our aging needs. Not surprisingly, communal living is gaining popularity as an alternative to a more traditional continuum of care and lifestyle.

Now let's look into the second crystal ball, which holds our current health conditions. Consider what they cost and how we must budget for them. For instance, someone with Type 2 diabetes needs to recognize that lifestyle choices matter. Good nutrition and regular exercise might lower blood sugar levels and help prevent loss of vision or a limb. Our goal is to prevent or stave off serious chronic illness which, in turn, will keep costs under control.

It's natural for us to go on with our lives. It's natural to avoid rocking the boat when we think a decision can wait. We're by nature always hoping for the best. After all, we're on a career path; we're still raising a family; we're busy mowing lawns and maintaining homes and attending work-related and other social events. Then there are the older children in college with added expenses. Who can stop and develop a plan for a distant future?

We boomers resist thinking that we are actually going to be old one day. Like it or not, we are all aging, and we are all going to die. A few weeks ago, a friend near my age summed it up for me. He said, "Mary, the time between 60 and 80 is only a blink." He's right. Sure, we'd rather not think about our old age, but that doesn't mean we can't plan for it.

It's too costly not to.

Mary Peters has been an occupational therapist, a lobbyist for Washington-based professional health care associations and a hospital administrator. She is a nationally certified Geriatric Care Manager. She founded Care For Life, a geriatric care management firm that provides nonmedical home care. Reach her at mpeters@careforlifearcharleston.com.

