



Photo: Mireille La Haye

# The ageing population—so what?

For nearly 15 years now, we've been hearing about how the population is ageing and the drastic consequences we can expect. All the studies on the healthcare system warn, for example, about the increasingly demanding care that will be required by this constantly growing segment of the population.

**T**hey've been harping for so long now about the ageing population and predicting that the crisis will arrive in 5, 10 or 30 years that sometimes it's hard not to be sceptical. Are all these horror stories perhaps just a cover for hidden interests? After all, statistics are just numbers! What do they mean in concrete terms?

Despite all the warnings by researchers and demographers, governments have never come up with any coherent policies. In fact, we have often seen exactly the opposite: in 1997, for instance, the government sent thousands of public servants, including doctors, into retirement. Neither has the problem of balancing work and family responsibilities received the kind of attention that would help to improve fertility rates. Today, our first reaction when we hear about the ageing population is to think "So what?" The predicted demographic shock seems unavoidable, but at the same time, far removed from our daily reality.

We are told that as of 2031, Quebec's population will begin shrinking; that in 30 years, the number of Quebecers 65 and older will have more than doubled; that by 2018, for the first time, there will be more seniors than young people; that baby-boomers will start retiring by the thousands in 2008; and that the population will decline in all parts of Quebec except Lanaudière, Laval, Montreal, the Laurentians and the Outaouais. But to tell the truth, the consequences are

not so obvious: for instance, the regions with shrinking populations will likely have a smaller proportion of the labour force than the provincial average—will they be able to maintain public services?

One thing is clear: without major steps to address these problems, such as increasing our fertility rate to match those of France or Norway, or boosting immigration, by 2030 there will be only two workers for every person over 65, as compared with five today. I read in the November 16 issue of Sherbrooke's *La Tribune* that the Centre hospitalier universitaire de Sherbrooke (CHUS) could see 2,182 of its 4,747 employees leave between 2004 and 2008. Imagine losing 46% of all your staff in the space of four years!

So we have all these statistics, each more alarming than the next—but none of them explains the changes we must make as society to cope with this new situation. Obviously, it will take some leadership on the part of the government to show us the way.

## Reinventing tomorrow's society

In October, Premier Jean Charest invited provincial leaders from all segments of society to a *Forum des générations*, to raise awareness of this issue and start putting together a plan for meeting tomorrow's challenges, or rather to come up with day-to-day measures to avoid deepening the gulf into which our society threatens to topple. I had the privilege of taking part in

this Forum, and it gave me a great deal of food for thought.

On the one hand, because the issue of demographic change and our shrinking population threatens all the public services paid for by income taxes: a smaller labour force means less cash in government coffers to fund education, health care, etc. If the current trend continues, within 30 years the budget of the Department of Health and Social Services could soak up 85% of all government spending! As one of my friends said, the State would become “one gigantic hospital”!

On the other hand, because strategies for reversing or adapting to this new demographic situation will require a radical change in thinking. How can Quebec’s leaders, most of them baby-boomers themselves, re-invent tomorrow’s society? They were part of the Quiet Revolution 30 years ago, it’s true, but can they really spark a new revolution today? Or will they just fight to hold onto the gains they have made for themselves? I am worried about the effects of numbers. Ageing baby-boomers will continue to form a majority of the population for another 15 to 20 years, with the commensurate political weight. Can they be objective enough to think honestly about the needs of younger, but less numerous generations?

I am going to go out on a limb and give an example taken from our own profession. It may seem anecdotal, but it illustrates the lack of intergenerational solidarity I am talking about. Why do young nurses with school-age children, whose annual holidays fall between Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day and Labour Day, not have priority in choosing their vacation dates so that they can take their vacation at the same time as their children? This would in no way penalize older nurses, who aren’t similarly limited by school holidays.

The *Forum des générations* highlighted the need for a very coherent vision based on intergenerational equity, sustainable development, energy development and regional development. We must work to create collective wealth so as to make Quebec a welcoming place renowned for its standard of living and quality of life. Our leaders talked about all the assets at our disposal to help us meet these challenges.

The Forum concluded with a work plan addressing nine themes. A number of them directly concern our profession, in particular the necessary efforts in terms of preventing disease, maintaining the healthcare system, ensuring access to higher education, transferring knowledge and know-how between generations, encouraging the immigration of skilled nurses and devising youth strategies. The Premier made some

remarkable comments regarding the next generation of nurses and how to develop their skills, by inviting doctors to collaborate in integrating nurses who are playing new roles in the healthcare system, especially that of front-line nurse practitioners. One urgent measure that met with unanimous approval was the need to adapt pension plans to allow those wishing to take semi-retirement to do so. Too often, we hear nurses who are entitled to take full retirement say that they would be prepared to continue working part time if not for the financial penalty.

Our Order has a part to play in seeking solutions. Faced with this demographic shock, the profession has to make permanent changes in the ways it does things. We must do everything we can to encourage the next generation of nurses, in the knowledge that there are choices to be made about the roles we should play.

I will conclude by noting that from now on every decision must meet a new criterion: Is it good for future generations? ●



Gyslaine Desrosiers  
President