

Bridging the gap between caregiver demand and service offering: a multi-method and multi-stakeholder study in Italy

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Context

Population aging and progressive loss of autonomy are putting the global healthcare system at risk. In Italy, more than 22% of the population is over 65, with many living in rural areas with limited healthcare and social service access, leading to social exclusion and frailty. Caregivers play a crucial role in "aging in place" practices in this scenario, but there are no planned and structured moments of education and support specifically dedicated to this figure, making caregivers metaphorically orphans of care and subject to a pragmatic psychological burden. It is therefore critical to inform and support caregivers in the network.

Methods

This research focuses on the needs of the elderly and their caregivers in the single case study of the Province of Cremona (Lombardy Region). The area was chosen as a primary observatory due to its high proportion of elderly residents and the presence of a wide range of healthcare and social services. A multi-method and multi-stakeholder foundational research approach was adopted, consisting of three main steps: (1) desk analysis to map and represents through flow-charts all health, social-health and social services provided by the formal care network in the province of Cremona for the frail elderly and their caregivers, as well as those provided by the informal care network identified through a snowball technique; (2) analysis of the needs of the stakeholders involved directly or indirectly in elderly care through individual interviews lasting about one hour; and (3) analysis of caregiver needs through semi-structured interviews lasting about one hour.

Results

The analyses revealed that: (1) in Cremona, the formal care network provides 21 services dedicated to the frail elderly and caregivers and 6 services are provided by the informal network and dedicated to family caregivers and professional informal care. People faces difficulties in accessing these services, as there are often no official sites and only social media pages that may not be up-to-date, and cross-referencing and information on social services on health-related sites is hard to find ; (2) the 21 stakeholders interviewed reported recurring problems such as shortage of personnel, inadequate training of current operators, need for data and information management, access to infrastructure and technology, access to services for the population, need to keep caregivers engaged and improve communication within the network; (3) the 20 interviewed caregivers cited similar needs pertaining to five main categories: organisational and pragmatic, information, social and health support, psychological and personal, engagement needs.

Discussion

The findings contributed from both a theoretical and managerial perspective. First, the study provided a comprehensive overview of the needs and expectations of elders and their caregivers in the Cremona Province, thereby allowing researchers to identify key areas of concern and prioritise them accordingly. Second, the study revealed the presence of a rich territory of services and resources available in the area. However, despite the vast offer, the lack of integration and communication among stakeholders affects the efficiency and quality of the service offering. Additionally, the absence of a central hub for information causes a mismatch between service providers and caregivers' demand. To address these issues, a platform to inform and guide caregivers about health and social care services offered in the territory could be a useful and appropriate solution. The further development of such a platform will be undertaken in the following months.