Health Workforce–System Misalignment with Older Adult Care Needs in Saudi Arabia: Perspectives of Health Professionals, Managers and Policymakers

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Study Overview

Background

Population ageing is increasing the demand for coordinated, age-responsive care. Yet, workforce planning for older adults across clinical, managerial and policy settings in Saudi Arabia remains poorly understood.

Aim

To explore current health workforce planning for older adult care in Saudi Arabia from the perspectives of health professionals, managers and policymakers.

Methods

Design: Exploratory qualitative interview study.

Participants: 25 (17 health professionals, 5 managers, 3 policymakers).

Sampling: Maximum variation purposive and snowball sampling. **Data collection:** Semi-structured interviews (Nov 2025–Apr 2026); 21 in Arabic and 4 in English.

Analysis: Inductive reflexive thematic analysis (experiential, contextualist approach).

Ethics: Flinders University HREC (No. 8758).

Results

Overarching theme
Workforce–system misalignment with older adult care needs

Theme A
Complex needs and fragmented pathways
- Multidimensional care needs
- Fragmented referral pathways
- Variable service organisation
- Digital access and family coordination demands

Theme B
Weak workforce planning, data and governance
- Reactive operational planning
- Fragmented and underused data
- Limited frontline participation
- Disconnected policy, standards and indicators

Theme C
Variable financing and regional workforce capacity
- Variable organisational funding
- Regional workforce disparities
- Urban-centred opportunities
- Staff movement to major cities

Increases workforce, communication and coordination requirements

Planning, data and governance constraints

Funding, deployment and retention constraints

Workforce gaps reinforce fragmented care pathways

Central workforce challenge

Theme D
Workforce capacity, capability and sustainability gaps
- Staffing shortages and team-composition gaps
- Limited specialist and allied-health capacity
- Variable geriatric training and preparation
- Retention and experience loss

Three Perspectives, One Interconnected Workforce Challenge

Health Professionals: Frontline workload and care coordination.

Managers: Service configuration and workforce sustainability.

Policymakers: Workforce planning, governance, financing and distribution.

Illustrative Quotes

"There is currently no specific or dedicated care pathway for older adults." *P06, Health Professional*

"In most cases, there is a lack of specialised professionals across the full range of required disciplines." *M02, Manager*

Variation Across Services

Participants reported examples of functioning services, structured training and locally tailored, needs-based planning, although these varied across organisations and locations.

Implications & Conclusions

Implications for Workforce Planning

Needs-based planning: Integrate age-specific needs, workload, and time for care coordination.

Workforce configuration: Consider staffing, geriatric competencies and multidisciplinary skill mix.

Data and governance: Strengthen workforce monitoring, frontline input and implementation.

Financing and distribution: Align funded employment, professional development, regional deployment and retention.

Study Limitations

Findings reflect participants' perspectives rather than a national assessment of the workforce or services. The sample was not representative of all Saudi regions or healthcare organisations.

Conclusion

Workforce challenges in older adult care in Saudi Arabia extend beyond staffing shortages. Fragmented care pathways, weak planning and governance, and variable financing and regional conditions contributed to gaps in workforce capacity, capability, and sustainability.

Key Message

Population Needs → Workforce Requirements → Health-System Capacity
For sustainable, age-responsive care.

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Meet Our Research Team
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