What is the likelihood of somebody becoming a carer at some point in their adult life? Joan Garrod investigates

The answer to the question posed in the title of this Update may surprise you — most of us will be a carer at some point. Almost two-thirds of people will be a carer for a family member or friend in their adult life. The figure is higher for women (70%) than for men (60%).

Examining survey data

The data on carers come from a recent report (November 2019) commissioned by the charity Carers UK and carried out by researchers from the University of Sheffield and the University of Birmingham. Many of the figures we have on the number of carers come as a ‘snapshot’ picture — the number of people in caring roles at a particular point in time. However, this research used longitudinal data taken from the British Household Panel Survey and Understanding Society, and covered the period 1991–2018. Participants in these...
surveys are regularly asked questions about caring responsibilities, and the data in the Carers UK report were based on people who had participated in one or other of the surveys for at least 15 years.

Gender differences
The research showed that most carers are middle-aged — almost half (46%) were aged 46–65. As in many other areas of life, the analysis showed a gender difference. By the age of 46, half of women are already a carer. While men have the same 50/50 chance, for them it comes 11 years later, at age 57. The percentage of women who are carers increases with ‘care intensity’ — the number of hours of care a person needs. Women comprised 57% of all carers providing either under 10 hours a week or 10–19 hours, but 62% and 63% respectively of those providing 20–49 hours and 50+ hours of care a week.

Not surprisingly, given the ages at which people become carers, many are ‘working carers’, meaning that they are combining their caring duties with paid employment. Working carers are found in every sector and every occupation. For some, the strain of paid employment and caring becomes too much, and Carers UK estimates that around 600 people per day are giving up paid work because of their caring responsibilities.

A heavy price to pay
The financial benefits to society for this unpaid care are significant. In an earlier report from 2015, the researchers calculated that unpaid carer support was worth £132 billion a year — similar to the cost of running the NHS.

However willingly care is given by the providers, it comes at a cost. Carers are at risk of financial strain, poor health and social isolation. For women in particular, there are far-reaching consequences.

Given that caring typically begins at a younger age for women than for men, this can have a significant impact on their level of participation in employment — for example, moving into part-time employment. This therefore reduces their lifetime earnings compared to men, which will have implications for them in later life. The impact on their earnings continues even after they have finished their caring duties.

Questions
1. Identify and explain two reasons why a growing number of people are in need of care.
2. Write a brief paragraph explaining why women are more likely than men to be carers.

Weblinks
Read the BBC News story about the Carers UK report at www.tinyurl.com/r2vwk33
Watch a video produced by Carers UK here: www.tinyurl.com/uuxyou3
Carers UK’s Will I care? report can be found here: www.tinyurl.com/qvqvfv3