



# Lifting the Silver Ceiling

## A Clinical Conversation with Geriatric Specialist Sharon A. Brangman MD

**R**ecently, University Hospital geriatrician Sharon Brangman MD testified before the U.S. Senate about an endangered natural resource: older Americans.

Appearing before the Senate’s Special Committee on Aging, Brangman addressed the issue of “the Silver Ceiling” – the growing concern that America will face a productivity crisis when its baby boomers retreat from the workforce.

Brangman, a national expert on aging and cognition, testified that keeping older Americans professionally active is good for the economy – and good for older workers, “whose identities are closely linked to the work they do.

“Their knowledge base is a precious resource,” Brangman insisted. “Older people in the workforce stimulate younger people and vice versa. It’s a win-win situation.

### Fresh Look

“The world has changed since we set up our retirement system,” she noted. “Labor today is more often cognitive than physical. We no longer need to get workers out of coal mines and factories at age 65. It’s time to look at phased retirement and consulting roles for older workers.”

Keeping older Americans active offers health as well as economic benefits, according to Brangman. “Rates of depression are lower in older people who are working or volunteering,” she told the senators. “People without anything to do focus on their aches and pains.”

### Inspired by Patients

Brangman’s interest in geriatrics crystallized while she was a resident at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. She realized these patients had rich experiences to share – and a universal desire not to become a burden. After a geriatrics fellowship at Montefiore, Brangman joined the SUNY Upstate faculty and University Geriatricians in 1989. “There is a strong commitment to geriatrics on this campus, despite the fact that a lot of what we do is not procedure-oriented, and thus not reimbursable,” she says.



*Sharon A. Brangman MD, Professor of Medicine, Division Chief, Geriatrics, Department of Medicine and Director, CNY Alzheimer’s Disease Assistance Center, SUNY Upstate Medical University, meets with Senator John Glenn of Ohio.*

# THE ACADEMIC DIFFERENCE



Sharon Brangman MD, center, testifies before the Senate's Special Committee on Aging.

### Holding Our Breath

"Demographically, Central New York has a huge number of geriatric patients, and demographics can't be ignored," Brangman says. "We're helping patients live longer but ignoring the implications – the complex care and multiple services they require. Our health care system doesn't adequately support or reimburse for the time-consuming primary care that older people need."

### Holistic Approach

Geriatric medicine looks at the entire patient – and the patient's environment – rather than at one disease or organ.

"A good amount of geriatric care is, by default, provided by primary care physicians," Brangman says. "But geriatric care is a distinct specialty. Just as children are not small adults, the medical issues of older adults are distinct from those of younger adults. The physiology of aging makes them more vulnerable to certain illnesses and medications. They have fewer physical reserves. There are changes in physical function and cognition. Spouses dying and children leaving impact their health."

"A primary care physician generally has seven to ten minutes to evaluate a patient," Brangman notes. "At University Geriatricians, it takes at least an hour to do a thorough, family-based assessment. We have two

physicians, two geriatric fellows, a nurse practitioner, physician assistant, social worker and specialized nurses working as a team. Often, we have a medical student and a medical resident participating in the evaluation, since medical education is an important part of our mission."

### Associated with Alzheimer's

In Central New York, Brangman is widely known as director of the CNY Alzheimer's Disease Assistance Center\* (ADAC), which serves 13 counties. Her annual CNY Alzheimer's conference draws standing-room-only crowds.

"After cancer, Alzheimer's is what patients fear the most," Brangman says. "Memory loss is not a normal part of aging. We can't cure Alzheimer's, but we now have clear criteria for diagnosis and medications that help patients maintain a higher quality of life."

### Voice of Reason

Advocating for older patients has become a personal mission for Brangman, despite her busy clinical practice. "It's difficult for some people to relate theoretically to geriatrics," she acknowledges. "But the reality is that we will all be there. It's time to create the geriatric care we will someday need ourselves."

\*University Geriatrics at UHCC is the practice site for the CNY Alzheimer's Assistance Center

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