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New study reveals baby boomers significantly overestimate knowledge and preparedness in assisting elderly parents

New baby boomer kit to assist with tough conversations with parents

Vancouver, BC - An Ipsos-Reid study released today by the Living Laboratory of the BC Institute of Technology indicates that 85 per cent of boomers with parents 70 years and older feel knowledgeable when it comes to assisting their parents in dealing with mobility difficulties. Of those, 84 per cent feel prepared to provide parents the assistance needed. Experts who have studied baby boomers and their parents' level of knowledge, however, assert that less than 50 per cent have sufficient levels of basic information. This indicates baby boomers are significantly over-estimating their level of knowledge and preparedness specifically related to their parents' mobility issues.

Of those who ranked mobility as "very important" or "important" in the survey, only 34 per cent of respondents said they spoke to their parents about their mobility "very often" or "often". When dealing with the issue of driving, that number drops to 24 per cent. Knowing what aging parents want early on is the first critical step in understanding how best to assist them and in arming oneself with the right information and resources.

"We are concerned that in general baby boomers are not adequately informed or prepared for the types of challenges that lay ahead as they help their parents through their senior years," says Christine Flegal, Gerontologist and Research Head, BCIT Living Laboratory. "This has implications for both the seniors as they struggle to cope privately with the challenges of declining ability and the boomers who experience increasing levels of stress and anxiety as they watch their parents' determination to stay independent."

Mobility difficulties are often the first sign of significant decline in health and quality of life for seniors. Reduced mobility often leads to diminished independence and increased social isolation which impacts on emotional health. Most importantly, issues with balance, strength and endurance put seniors at risk for a significant fall which is known to reduce life expectancy by 25 per cent and cost the Canadian health care system an estimated \$1 billion annually (Public Health Agency of Canada).

"Declining mobility is the canary in the coal mine when it comes to seniors' health and quality of life," affirms Flegal. "It's very important that baby boomers know that compassionate persistence is often the road to success with parents who are resistant to using a cane or walker to help safely preserve mobility for as long as possible."

To assist baby boomers in their tough conversations with parents about any issue, The Living Laboratory as part of the *Mobility: Now you're going places* program has developed a "Mobility: Baby Boomer Kit". The kit consists of a "Tough Conversations Guide", tips on what to look for to determine if there are mobility issues, and information on the types of mobility devices that can assist them. The "Tough Conversations Guide" helps boomers determine where their parent fits on a decision-making scale and then provides conversation strategies for each stage of decision-making.

“In my experience working with seniors, I often see that pride and life-long independence means they are very reluctant to admit any decline or accept assistance from their children,” confirms Flegal. “On the other hand, boomers want to believe their parents will live forever so they often become willing, if loving, accomplices to this illusion of invincibility until a major health or other crisis hits.”

Experts have observed that boomers avoid tough topics with parents; are silenced when parents dismiss concerns; or get frustrated and stop trying when parents don't immediately follow suggestions or advice. Decisions are put off until the family hits a crisis at which point they are made under high stress with limited time and options.

The survey showed that those boomers who frequently talk to their parents about any issue have better success. For instance, among all boomers 69 per cent say they have been successful in speaking to their parents about finances. That number jumps to 91 per cent among those who say that they discuss the same issue with parents “very often” and drops to 61 per cent for those who speak only “sometimes” or “occasionally”. The pattern is consistent across all issues.

“My message to boomers is to keep all communication lines open but especially those on tough topics around aging,” reiterates Flegal.

BCIT's Dr. Tong Louie Living Laboratory is dedicated to applied research and development of environments and products that promote independent living for elderly and disabled populations. The Lab is a large open facility resembling a movie set which allows researchers to simulate any built environment, from an entire home or workplace, to multiple examples of a single space. Healthcare professionals, manufacturers, inventors, architects and developers of assistive devices, services and environments for elderly and disabled adults can pre-test products, assess designs, and analyze procedures within this unique facility. The Lab was developed in partnership with Simon Fraser University.

The *Mobility: Now you're going places* project was created by the Living Lab and is supported with funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada. The project includes community workshops, resources and a web site that is dedicated to helping seniors and the caregivers and family who support them in their efforts to stay mobile and safe. For more information, please go to www.bcit.ca/mobility