

Value-Based Geriatric Care: Good News from Portugal

Cuidados Geriátricos Baseados em Valor: Boas Notícias de Portugal

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INTRODUCTION

Portugal has a rapidly aging population, underscoring the critical need for specialized geriatric care. While geriatrics is not yet recognized as a medical specialty in Portugal, the Portuguese Medical Association acknowledges it as a competence.¹ Recent initiatives, such as the PROGRAMMING COST Action 21122 event in April 2024, entitled “Top 10 Value-Based Geriatric Care Models and Interventions: Towards a Sustainable Healthcare System, Improving Older Adults’ Quality of Life”² have played a pivotal role in highlighting value-based care models (focused on improving patient outcomes while containing healthcare costs). Throughout the event, multiple sessions under the banner “Good News from Portugal” highlighted successful geriatric care models and interventions currently being implemented across the country (Table 1). While not exhaustive, these contributions were subsequently developed into the present manuscript, which brings together some of the most recognized and well-established approaches in the field.

Even though geriatric medicine is an emerging field in Portugal, several individual and collective initiatives have been developed. In this article, we will highlight the current status of the leading geriatric care models in Portugal.

Comprehensive geriatric assessment-based care models

In Portugal most doctors who have training in geriatric medicine carry out a comprehensive geriatric assessment (CGA) in various settings.¹ However, this is often done informally, without established guidelines or dedicated geriatrics departments. Guidelines published by Núcleo de Estudos de Geriatria da Medicina Interna (NEGERMI) and Grupo de Estudos de Saúde do Idoso/Geriatria (GESI) have helped physicians adopt systematic approaches to assessing older adults’ functionality, cognition, emotional state, and nutrition. Despite progress, challenges remain, including a lack of standardized guidelines and geriatrics clinics conducted by non-specialists.

Currently, Portugal has nine geriatrics clinics, three oncogeriatrics clinics, three orthogeriatrics units, and two acute geriatrics departments. Although setbacks such as the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted services, plans are underway to expand specialized care offerings.

Falls prevention programmes

Fall prevention strategies operate at national, hospital, and community levels. The National Patient Safety Plan 2021 - 2026 includes measures to reduce falls in healthcare settings, while hospital guidelines, such as the use of the Morse Fall scale, help identify and address risks. At the

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hospital level, programs like “*Quedas*” at Unidade Local de Saúde (ULS) do Médio Tejo analyze and mitigate falls during hospital stays. Initiatives such as the “Age-Friendly Health Systems” project at Hospital Arcebispo João Crisóstomo focus on improving mobility and educating caregivers.³ Community programs, including “*AtivaMente Bonfim*” in Porto and “*Academia de Mobilidade*” in Lisbon, offer physical activity and education to reduce fall risks.

Despite these advancements, access to fall prevention programs remains unequal, mostly concentrated in urban areas.

Orthogeriatrics

Orthogeriatrics in Portugal has advanced since the first dedicated unit was established in 2015 at ULS Gaia-Espinho,⁴ enabling a multidisciplinary approach to older patients with orthopedic trauma, especially hip fractures. While more orthogeriatrics units have been created, many depend on individual practitioners and were disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, few hospitals with orthopedics trauma services have formal orthogeriatrics units, with others relying on internal medicine specialists upon request. The Fragility Fracture Network (FFN)-Portugal Orthogeriatrics Working Group is working on a national hip fracture registry and guidelines to expand orthogeriatrics units, underscoring a commitment to specialized geriatric care.⁵

Oncogeriatrics

Cancer is increasingly common in older adults, requiring specialized geriatric oncology management. Since 2019, the Portuguese Society of Oncology’s Working Group on Oncogeriatrics has promoted the field through educational events and training. Hospital de São João in Porto has led with structured CGA-based oncogeriatrics

Table 1 – Value-based geriatric care models and key examples from Portugal

Value-based geriatric care model	Description	Good examples from Portugal
Comprehensive geriatric Assessment (CGA)	A systematic assessment to holistically evaluate older patients, including their functional, cognitive, emotional, and nutritional status.	The first CGA-based clinics were established in Lisbon (led by Prof. Gorjão Clara, 2010) followed by Coimbra (led by Prof. Teixeira Veríssimo). Currently, many outpatient clinics exist in Portugal (Fig. 1).
Falls prevention programs	Multidomain interventions for fall risk reduction, including assessments, education, and environmental modifications.	National guidelines recommend using fall risk scales (e.g., Morse Fall Scale). “ <i>Quedas</i> ” project at Centro Hospitalar Médio Tejo; “ <i>Hospital Amigo dos + Velhos</i> ” at Arcebispo João Crisóstomo; “ <i>AtivaMente Bonfim</i> ” in Porto; “ <i>Academia de Mobilidade</i> ” in Lisbon.
Orthogeriatrics	Multidisciplinary care to optimize outcomes for older patients with orthopedic trauma, especially hip fractures.	The first orthogeriatric unit was established at ULS Gaia-Espinho in 2015, with other units developed since then (Fig. 1). In 2024, the Fragility Fracture Network-Portugal was created.
Oncogeriatrics	Cancer management guided by CGA to personalize treatment, optimize surgical outcomes, and address oncological needs.	Structured CGA consultations at Hospital S. João in Porto; the pGA > 70 project for perioperative care; oncogeriatrics consultations at Hospital CUF Descobertas since 2023 for breast cancer patients.
Vaccination programs	High-coverage campaigns targeting older adults for diseases like COVID-19 and influenza.	Seasonal campaigns achieving over 90% public trust and vaccination rates exceeding 65% for adults aged 80+. GESI and NEGERMI guidelines support systematic immunization strategies.
Acute Geriatric Units (AGUs)	Holistic geriatric care combines medical, rehabilitative, and social support to address older patients’ complex needs. Focusing on acute care, functional preservation, and delirium prevention.	Since 2023, dedicated beds for acute geriatric care have been established at Hospital Curry Cabral and Hospital de Oliveira de Azeméis (Fig. 1).
Emergency Frailty Units	Units within Emergency Departments (ED) are dedicated to efficiently managing frail older patients.	Santa Maria Hospital prioritizes older patients (75+) with a Clinical Frailty Score ≥ 5, facilitating either home discharge or hospitalization in daylight-illuminated rooms. Integrated care plans involve primary care, hospital teams, social services, and community resources.
Integrated Care models	Care pathways are designed to seamlessly coordinate primary, hospital, and community services for older adults.	ULS Litoral Alentejano and ULS Matosinhos reduced emergency visits by 47% - 50%; development of digital monitoring tools for chronic disease, such as heart failure and diabetes.
Nutritional interventions	Programs addressing malnutrition in older adults at institutional, individual, and systemic levels.	Nutritional risk screening, standardized dietary guidelines for specific needs (e.g., dysphagia), and food/nutrition literacy programs by PNPAS.

GESI: Grupo de Estudos Saúde do Idoso; NEGERMI Núcleo de Geriatria da Sociedade Portuguesa de Medicina Interna; PNPAS: Programa Nacional para a Promoção da Alimentação Saudável.

clinics since 2021, notably benefiting frail older adults.⁶ The pGA>70 project uses CGA for surgical decisions, preventing functional decline and postoperative delirium. In 2022, the Portuguese Society of Senology included older women in its breast cancer consensus.⁶ Hospital CUF Descobertas, a large private hospital in Lisbon, launched an oncogeriatrics clinic in 2023, setting a model for expanding such services across Portugal.

Vaccination

Vaccination campaigns have been vital in protecting older adults in Portugal from infectious diseases like COVID-19 and influenza. With over 90% of the population expressing trust in vaccines, the government provides free vaccinations for high-risk groups, including older adults.⁷ For the 2023 - 2024 season, over 65% of those aged 80+ have been vaccinated, aided by partnerships with community pharmacies that enhance accessibility. This model has become a core part of the national immunization strategy.⁷ Recent updates from NEGERMI and GESI have enhanced vaccination guidelines, emphasizing comprehensive coverage for the aging population.

Acute care inpatient unit

Acute geriatric units (AGUs) in Portugal have grown since the first unit was established at Gaia-Espinho (2015 - 2019), alongside an orthogeriatrics unit. This multidisciplinary model brought together specialists, nurses, physiotherapists, and social services to meet older patients' specific needs, emphasizing both medical and social support. New units opened at Hospital Vila Franca de Xira (2017 - 2019) and Hospital Curry Cabral (2023), reflecting a commitment to geriatric care despite past challenges. Using CGA-based interventions, AGUs focus on preserving patient routines and preventing delirium. In 2023, a new geriatric center opened at Hospital de Oliveira de Azeméis, with plans underway to further expand AGUs across the country in the coming years.

Emergency department frailty assessment units

Emergency department frailty assessment units prioritize the needs of older patients. For instance, Hospital de Santa Maria, a public university hospital in Lisbon, where 30% of ER patients are over 65, has established a fast-track system for frail individuals, prioritizing their care through specialized protocols and a trained team. This system

✕ Orthogeriatric Unit

ULS Gaia e Espinho, Porto
ULS Santa Maria, Lisbon

ULS Médio Tejo, Santarém
ULS Loures - Odivelas, Lisbon

▲ Oncogeriatric Unit / Clinic

ULS São João, Porto
CUF Descobertas, Lisbon

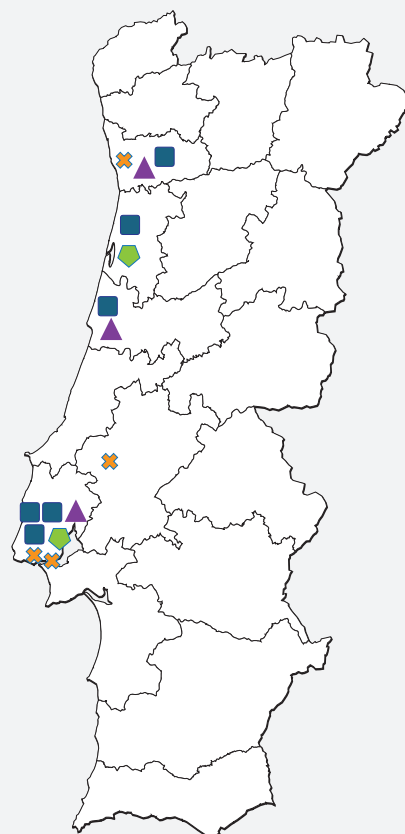
ULS Coimbra, Coimbra

◆ Acute Geriatric Service

ULS São José, Lisbon
ULS Entre Douro e Vouga, Aveiro

■ Outpatient Geriatric Clinic

ULS Entre Douro e Vouga, Aveiro
ULS Gaia e Espinho, Porto
ULS Coimbra, Coimbra
ULS São José, Lisbon
CUF Belém, Lisbon
ULS Santa Maria, Lisbon
CUF Descobertas, Lisbon
CUF Tejo, Lisbon
CUF Alvalade, Lisbon



This map is not exhaustive, and there may be other activities either existing or in the process of being developed that have not yet been identified.

Figure 1 – Current map of value-based geriatric care models in Portugal

includes an integrated care plan linking patients, caregivers, and support services to facilitate home discharge or home hospitalization.⁸ This project is aligned with European best practices, with NEGERMI translating materials to standardize geriatric emergency care across Portugal.⁹

Integrated care models

The aim of integrated care models in Portugal is to support older and frail populations through coordinated pathways across primary care, hospital, and community services. The National Health Service (SNS) has recently been reconfigured, with 39 local health units (ULS) managing both primary and hospital care.¹⁰ While ULS do not ensure full integration, it may promote better care coordination.¹¹ Key aspects include population risk stratification and case management, as seen in ULS do Litoral Alentejano and ULS Matosinhos, reducing ER visits by 47% - 50% and hospital admissions by 50%. Digital tools for chronic conditions like heart failure are also in use and have achieved promising results in reducing emergency admissions. Portugal's integrated care models demonstrate a commitment to coordinated, person-centered care for older adults.

Nutritional interventions

Since 2012, Portugal's National Programme for Promotion of Healthy Eating (PNPAS) has addressed the nutritional needs of older adults through a multi-level approach. At the environmental level, it focuses on improving food quality in institutions, introducing a standardized diet manual aligned with international dysphagia guidelines (IDDSI) to ensure nutritionally adequate and appealing meals. Individually, it promotes nutrition literacy among older adults and caregivers, offering guidance on food intake, hydration, and meal enhancement to support self-care and health management.¹²

Portugal's National Programme prioritizes early malnutrition detection through screenings in electronic health records, supported by a 2023 directive for systematic nutritional risk assessments across the Portuguese National Health Service (SNS). Real-time data dashboards drive improvements, with efforts enhancing older adults' quality of life despite COVID-19 challenges.

CONCLUSION

Advancements in geriatric medicine in Portugal show a shift towards value-based care for older adults. Specialized care models like orthogeriatrics, falls prevention, and comprehensive geriatric assessments are improving outcomes and quality of life, gradually strengthening Portugal's geriatrics care framework despite structural limitations.

To make these value-based models standard practice

across the healthcare system, significant investment in geriatric medicine is essential. The international COST Action PROGRAMMING supports this by promoting education in geriatric medicine for healthcare professionals at all levels.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MA, SD: Study design, writing and critical review of the manuscript.

LM, LB, FO, GS, CB, AB: Writing and critical review of the manuscript.

AF, AV, RB: Study design, critical review of the manuscript.

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AF has a leadership or fiduciary role at the board of Sociedade Portuguesa de Nefrologia.

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