

The Senior 'Stereotype'.

The Australasian Centre on Ageing (ACA) has brought research and policy on ageing and the 'baby boomer' generation to the forefront.

The six month study found there was enthusiasm in government for increasing the use of research findings in policy development and that academia and the government should work more closely to make it happen.

The Centre Director, Prof Helen Bartlett said, "*Policies that will affect 'baby boomers' need to be based on clear and accurate information about their needs and expectations*".

Planning for current and future generations has become more important with our population ageing more rapidly than ever before.

Ageism, like racism and sexism creates its own self prophecies and promotes life-styles that damage individual potential.

It's a cumulative process; the older people get, the more inferior they are assumed to become, and the more difficult it is for them to swim against the social tides that can so easily swamp them.

Terms used to belittle or abuse people often prefixed by silly or stupid, use old as an insult.

The media through articles and advertising bombard us with ways to avoid ageing and look younger but conversely how to live longer.

Media portrayals of old age are often couched in terms of frailty, senility, poverty powerlessness and loneliness.

Our vocabulary for describing older generations is limited and does not take into account the differences that exist between people. This reinforces stereotypes,

The consequence of negative attitudes towards ageing is discrimination against older people in every area of life. As with most stereotyping, there are elements of truth. But many current views about older people are based upon misunderstanding and a lack of knowledge about old age.

Survey evidence in Australia in the 1980's and 1990's indicates that older Australians are very satisfied with particular aspects of their lives including their leisure, organizational involvements, local communities and opportunities to help other people. On average their life satisfaction ratings are much the same as the rest of the adult population.

They experience less anxiety and depression but also fewer strong positive emotions, Life is less turbulent, more on an even keel.

The majority of older people are healthy and active, in particular those who are under 80 years of age.

Because longevity is increasing, so too are the numbers of a very old people .This inevitably results in increasing numbers of people who will experience frailty and the infirmities of very old age.

However, even if one of the common diseases of old age does affect us, it does not mean that life will be any less fulfilling.

From a biological perspective, deterioration accompanying ageing proceeds at different rates in different individuals.

Some common changes which can begin as early as 25 to 30 years of age include; a decline in the immune system; slowing of the metabolism ; decline in liver and kidney functions ; loss of elasticity in the blood vessels; decrease in bone mass; thinning and drying of the skin; and changes to eye site; hearing and taste.

The brain begins to shrink and the quality of, and need for sleep diminishes.

A number of age related conditions may then develop, such as arthritis, cataracts, diabetes and most types of cancer.

What are the universal or "normal" ageing processes?

Many answers to this question are coming from the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Ageing.

Source:

www.families.qld.gov.au/seniors Dept of Families (Qld) - Seniors Interests Branch - Judy Spence MP

Job, E (1984) Eighty plus

Heady, B (1999) Old Age is Not Downhill.

Budge, M (1998) Age Matters

Barnett, Yvonne Dr. (1996) Ageism... .Avebury, Aldershot

Myths and Legends of Ageing

The ironic fact about ageing is that we are all doing it. From the moment we are born we gain some abilities and functions, and lose some.

Yet the myths persist that older age is associated with loss of independence, physical or mental decline, lack of a grasp of modern day life's challenges and even less inclination for social life including sex life.

And these myths are the basis for forming of stereotypes that if acted upon, can be unlawful discrimination.

The Facts

Statistics compiled by the NSW Ageing and Disability Department show that 97% of older people of 60+ in NSW are more likely to live independently than need looking after, and the majority require no assistance with daily tasks.

Most retired people are socially engaged.

While physical ageing is a gradual and life-long process, the most significant decline in the human body occurs between 30-40 years of age and the onset of disabilities, sensory losses or chronic diseases are not inevitable with ageing.

Yes, older people are active sexually - sexuality is a characteristic common to all ages.

Only a small percentage, between 1% - 3% of older people suffer diseases of memory loss such as Alzheimer's and other dementias.

The mythology surrounding ageing can be considered to be one of the main contributors to community attitudes that devalue ageing, that create stereotypes of older people, that cause people to use belittling and derogatory language to describe anyone older than themselves.

Age at work

Just the definition of older person requires some attention. Average life expectancy among most older people in Australia is among the highest in the world. On average men live to 75 years and women to 81.

Yet in the workforce discrimination is rampant despite it being unlawful. Some recent examples were reported widely in the Australian media.

Mature age status is considered to be as young as thirty-five, according to a 1999 ABS survey which showed that 86% of Australian managers considered this to be the optimum age.

A 1999 Drake Management Consulting survey of Australia's top 500 executives found that none were willing to hire managers and executives over the age of 50 and 65 % of these companies said this group would be the first to be retrenched. 62% of such organisations make their selections from those between 30 and 40 years old while just 23% sought workers in their forties.

Yet all the research evidence suggests older workers are just as productive, trustworthy, stable and conscientious and as adaptable to change as younger workers.

Source: [http://www.lawlmk.nsw.gov.au/adb.nsf/85b15a3388df13624a2565c6001633d9/2eeec3763bdf1fi\)4ca2568330006ec9a?OpenDocument](http://www.lawlmk.nsw.gov.au/adb.nsf/85b15a3388df13624a2565c6001633d9/2eeec3763bdf1fi)4ca2568330006ec9a?OpenDocument)

Older people in Queensland are expected to increase as a proportion of population from 11.5 per cent in 2001 to more than 23 per cent in 2051. By 2021, the number of Queenslanders aged 65 years and over is projected to double from 407,000 to some 825,000.

This ageing of the population brings with it significant changes as more people spend a large part of their lives in active retirement.

The Seniors Interests Unit within the Department of Families has a lead role across government for ageing and older people's issues. The Unit consults broadly to develop and influence policies and programs which relate to ageing or impact on older people's lives, and develops and disseminates information relating to issues relevant to older people and those interested in ageing issues.

In addition, the Unit is responsible for other major initiatives that reflect emerging issues, provides guidance across government in relation to seniors' policy issues, and promotes positive attitudes towards older people and ageing through events that challenge stereotypes of older people.

Major activities

Major activities undertaken by the Seniors Interests Unit include: coordinating and monitoring the implementation of State Government initiatives in Our Shared Future: Queensland's Framework for Ageing 2000-2004 (PDF 1.7 MB);

- providing information to government and non-government agencies to promote the involvement of older people in decision making processes;
- developing publications addressing issues relevant to older people and those interested in ageing issues;

With apologies to authors not acknowledged.....Richard Holmes, Sept '03

Website: au.geocities.com/senior_matters_senior

- collecting statistics relating to older people in Queensland;
- researching and developing initiatives in response to issues affecting older people, e.g. the abuse of older people, older volunteers and crime and older people; and
- organising and participating in events that promote and acknowledge the contributions and achievements of older people in the community, such as Seniors Week and the Premier's Awards.

Theories of Ageing

Theories of ageing fall into two groups. The “programmed” theories hold that ageing follows a biological timetable, perhaps a continuation of the one that regulates childhood growth and development.

The damage or error theories emphasize environmental assaults to our systems that gradually cause things to go wrong.

Many of the theories of ageing are not mutually exclusive.

Programmed Theories:

Programmed Senescence. Ageing is the result of the sequential switching on and off of certain genes, with senescence being defined as the time when age-associated deficits are manifested.

Endocrine Theory. Biological clocks act through hormones to control the pace of ageing.

Immunological Theory. A programmed decline in immune system functions leads to an increased vulnerability to infectious disease and thus ageing and death.

Error Theories:

Wear and Tear. Cells and tissues have vital parts that wear out.

Rate of Living. The greater an organism’s rate of oxygen basal metabolism, the shorter its life span.

Crosslinking. An accumulation of crosslinked proteins damages cells and tissues, slowing down bodily processes.

Free Radicals. Accumulated damage caused by oxygen radicals causes cells and eventually organs to stop functioning.

Error Catastrophe. Damage to mechanisms that synthesize proteins results in faulty proteins which accumulate to a level that causes catastrophic damage to cells, tissues and organs.

Somatic Mutation. Genetic mutations occur and accumulate with increasing age, causing cells to deteriorate and malfunction.

Source: www.nia.nih.gov/health/pubs/secrets-of-aging.

'The End of the Generation Game'

by Prof John Quiggin, Senior Research Fellow at UQ and ANU (April 2003)

One of the standard ploys in journalism, marketing and political commentary is the generation game.

The basic idea is to label a generation 'X' or 'Y', then dissect its attitudes, culture, and relationship with other generations. The most famous generation of course, is that of the Baby Boomers, born between the end of World War II and the early 1960s, and their most enduring contribution to the generation gap is the 'Generation Gap' between children and their parents.

The generation game is played with particular vigour in cultural commentary, but its reach seems to be extending all the time. No U.S. Presidential election would now be complete without voluminous commentary on the generational backgrounds of the contenders. There is even a branch of economics called generational accounting, which is supposed to show whether one generation is subsidising another through the tax and welfare system.

At first sight, discussion of this kind can carry with it an air of fresh insight, but most of it stales rapidly. Much of what passes for discussion about the merits or otherwise of particular generations is little more than a repetition of unchanging formulas about different age groups the moral degeneration of the young, the rigidity and hypocrisy of the old, and so on.

At the other end of the age scale, the increase in life expectancy has gradually weakened the hold of age-specific categories. Fifty years ago, few people could expect to live past eighty, and anyone over sixty was considered old. People aged between forty and sixty were middle-aged in the literal sense of being in the middle of their adult life.

Today, hardly anyone between forty and sixty admits to being middle-aged. Middle age, if it exists at all, seems to commence in the late fifties, while government-sponsored advertising campaigns tell us that no-one is 'old', merely 'older'.

A recent Harris Poll conducted for the National Council on Aging found that almost half the people between 65 and 69 now consider themselves middle-aged. So do one-third of people in their 70s. But these changes have taken place over many decades.

The parents of the Baby Boomers were already taking umbrage back in the 1960s when their children referred to them as 'middle-aged and middle-class'.

The UQ's, Australasian Centre on Ageing has done extensive research and policy on ageing including effects on the 'baby boomer' era. The study was conducted to find out the extent that government policy reflected the facts about ageing.

Prof. Helen Bartlett, the Centre Director said, *"Given the numerous implications of our ageing population, it is important to involve all sectors, especially older people in prioritizing the ageing and research policy agenda and in identifying funding to ensure best policies are developed and implemented"*.

New studies which the ACA are seeking funding for include; the development of age friendly community standards; and promoting physical activity for older people through social support and community capacity building.

Source: ACA Bulletin

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Dementia and Ageing.

Researchers are studying the ageing process in more than 1000 people from 20 to 90 years and beyond. They have found that individuals age at extremely different rates. In fact within one person, organs and organ systems show different rates of decline. Biological ageing is not always directly related to chronological ageing. There may be little difference between a very fit 70 year old and a moderately fit 30 year old. Biological age can be influenced by diet, lifestyle, exercise and environment and can change when these factors are changed.

Serious decline in muscle strength and exercise capacity is not an inevitable part of ageing. Many physical problems associated with older age, particularly those involving the oxygen transport and musculoskeletal systems can be improved by physical exercise, even at low levels.

Researchers are studying exercise as a factor that may have an impact on how long people live or at least on how fit people can be at older age.

Exercises that put on weight on bones, such as jogging, walking, and weight lifting have been shown to strengthen them.

One landmark study in America has shown that exercise can strengthen muscles, improve mobility and reduce frailty, even among people aged 90 years and over.

As people age they become more vulnerable to ill health and a proportion of older people suffer from chronic conditions which can cause functional deficits requiring assistance with activities of daily living. Older people are more likely than younger people to have multiple conditions, which complicate the management of each condition.

In Queensland, 49% of persons aged 60 years or over report that they have no disability. However, the proportion of people with a disability increases with age, particularly after age of 85 years, when over 80% of people report a disability.

Source: www.families.qld.gov.au/seniors (Frame 14)

Older Workers will be Needed with Economy Upswing.

Within seven years, there will be a shortfall of 10 million workers in the US.

Employers need to consider a comprehensive strategy that includes training policies, retention and recruitment programs. It will slow this exodus from the work force and the knowledge and talent drain while maximizing older workers productivity.

The Idaho's Older Workers Program which has been in operation for the past 16 years has called for Congress to streamline the federal program for older workers.

The program pays the wages (normally minimum wage for 20 hours per week) to seniors who are assigned to schools, hospitals, senior centers, no profits or government agencies.

Source: www.senate.gov/~aging/index (The US Senate Spec. Comm. On Aging)

In the Interests.....

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