

Population Ageing: How to Turnaround Attitudes to Older Australians?

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Recently a new block of retirement apartments was completed at Sydney's Bondi Beach; covering one of its walls was a giant poster advertising the units for sale and depicting three elderly, grey-haired women in swimsuits, carrying surfboards and heading for the sea.

The ad was obviously designed to appeal to the older person who thinks of him or herself as active, healthy, sociable, with a positive outlook on life – someone who would like their later years to be enjoyable and socially engaged. But how does this ideal compare to people's experiences of ageing in Australia?

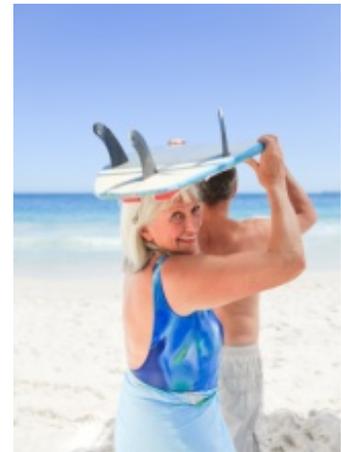
The world population is ageing rapidly, according to the [World Health Organisation](#), and – along with other developed nations – most Australians are living longer. By mid-century, statistical projections show one in every four Australians will be over 65. Many of today's Third Agers are healthier, wealthier and have higher aspirations and expectations than previous generations, say demographers. But that does not always correspond with the perception of older people in our society.

Attitudes towards older people have been shifting for some time "from a sympathetic and paternalistic view of old people as needy and deserving to one where they are seen as a bit of a burden", says Hal Kendig, an expert in gerontology and a chief investigator at the [ARC Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research](#) (CEPAR), a new collaborative research centre between The University of New South Wales, the Australian National University and The University of Sydney. Kendig warns that the government's third Intergenerational Report published in 2010 (set up on the principle of ensuring fiscal equity between generations) risks "scape-goating" older people for being a drain on health resources. Older people's fears that they are viewed as fragile, unproductive and a burden on society were confirmed in a 2010 report from Deakin University, *Respect in an Ageing Society*, which found ageism was rife in Australia, particularly among Generations X and Y.

Changing these attitudes will depend on a whole-of-life view of ageing and an understanding that investing in the health and well-being of ageing adults benefits everyone in society, believes Kendig, who heads the Ageing, Work and Health Research Department at the University of Sydney. He points to a new generation of research indicating that although eventual decline with age is inevitable, capability varies from person to person and can be influenced and improved. "There are a number of physical, psychological and social factors that can influence the ageing process that begin early on in life and are therefore amenable to change," Kendig says. "A person's education, income and other aspects of social class are linked to their health habits – positive and negative – and will determine risk factors for serious illness later in life."

A Template for Ageing Well

A template for healthy ageing will include a basic level of financial security, age-friendly environments, availability and accessibility of effective healthcare and maintaining social patterns, according to WHO. It has been an ambition, if not an achievement, of the Australian government to work towards that ideal. The Howard administration laid the framework in 2001 with its National Strategy for an Ageing Australia. Progress has been slow but that ambition has fired up 10 years later in the present government's 2011 report: [Realising the Economic Potential of Senior Australians](#) (EPSA), which draws on research by the Consultative Forum on Mature Age Participation. Four key areas are considered the cornerstones



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for ageing well: healthy living and communities, housing, participation and lifelong learning. The report assesses the current situation for older people in each area and outlines where improvements could be made.

Kendig says it is significant that the EPSA report should come out of the Treasury department (which is always looking for ways to increase productivity and curb spending) as it may signal intention as well as recognition that older people are worth investing in and that by doing so, all of society benefits. The demographic and economic facts are that Australia will really need older workers in the decades ahead.

Older people's own opinions of what makes for a good ageing experience appear in the ongoing MELSHA survey (Melbourne Longitudinal Studies on Healthy Ageing), led by Kendig and Colette Browning of the Healthy Ageing Research Unit at Monash University. The MELSHA study records the experiences of older people over a 12-year period. They largely attribute ageing well to continuing to live independently in the community with good self-rated health and psychological wellbeing. Digging deeper, the researchers found the significant lifestyle factors that influence this are physical activity, nutrition, not being underweight, social support, low strain and not smoking – all things that are potentially improvable in a person's life and can reduce the risk of chronic disease.

Health is obviously a vital enabler for ageing well and the yardstick by which people measure successful old age. Research projects, such as Life Histories and Health: Babyboomers in Australia and England, draw attention to how different life experiences of the baby boom cohort (defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as those born from 1946 to 1965) influence health outcomes as individuals age. Outcomes include wellbeing, productivity, pension and service use.

Take gender, for example [Julie Byles](#), director of the Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing at the University of Newcastle – and one of the chief investigators of the research – comments: "There's an old saying: Women get sick and men die. Throughout life women tend to have higher levels of psychological distress than men. As they get older, they acquire more vulnerability, have more falls and hip fractures than men and are more likely to get arthritis and have heart disease post-menopause." Partly this may be due to gender-related biological differences, women's greater reproductive load, she says, and women not having as much physiological reserves to draw on as men. "That's why it's particularly important for women than men to remain physically active as they age," Byles says.

Socio-economic factors have perhaps the most profound effect on healthy ageing. Poverty, educational disadvantage and unemployment throughout life have an accumulative impact on health inequality. The starkest example of this is among Indigenous people, many of whom die in their 40s and 50s from chronic diseases that do not afflict white Australians until they reach their 70s and 80s. Obesity is another major cause of chronic illness and has risen sharply among older people in the past 20 years. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the numbers of obese people aged over 55 trebled from 310,000 in 1980 to 940,000 in 2000.

But it's wrong to think of an ageing population as a sick population, says Kendig, particularly in this current generation of over-55s. "We are accustomed to think of the area of health as a drain, it costs us money. But the way older people think about it is as a resource and investment. Health is the main enabler so that they can remain independent, contribute and stay socially connected."

Working It Out

One of the ways many older people want to contribute is by staying in work. National Seniors Australia (NSA) reports that demeaning stereotypes are pushing older workers towards premature retirement. Michael O'Neill, NSA chief executive, says: "Unfounded assumptions around the energy, potential or job suitability of older workers are only serving to undermine their confidence, work performance and, ultimately, commitment."

In research conducted by the University of Queensland for the NSA, 1428 employees aged between 50 and 75 were asked about their experiences. Typical responses included: "I sometimes feel that I am invisible because of my age. I have difficulty at times with getting people to include me and listen to me." "I take the negativity I face at work home and I feel like it impacts my overall health and wellbeing." "Retirement is often used as a rejection of the 'mature' by the new management style. Many older people

retire out of despair, not out of desire."

Outside of the labour market, there are two million older Australians who are interested in working, according to the EPSA report. By not utilising the skills and experience of older Australians through early or involuntary retirement, society is dragging down individual's wellbeing – and the economy is also suffering, losing A\$10.8 billion a year through untapped talent, according to Treasury estimates.

"There are huge advantages to the economy of converting a potential beneficiary of government benefits to an income earner and taxpayer while there are also advantages for a mature worker in remaining productive and connected," says Kendig. However, those representing workers whose bodies and minds can't cope with work anymore are saying "No, thanks!" to the whole idea of work 'til you drop. Notably, Fair Work Australia recently ended a long-running industrial dispute by approving a new workplace agreement for Qantas engineers, which provides workers with more options to transition to retirement through job sharing agreements and part-time work.

Kendig says the global financial crisis has pushed a lot of the baby boomer generation back into work or forced them to stay in work longer due to fears of not having enough money for increasingly longer lives. "Older people who want to work for as long as possible should be able to do so – but there has to be humane income support for those who can't work and a more differentiated and equitable tax and income support system. It's not just age, it's capacities," Kendig says.

Despite the downside to ageing, people do tend to be happier as they get older. Byles says that from the age of 45 to 80, mental health actually improves and unless someone suffers relationship breakdown or health problems, for example, people in their 60s and 70s are generally happier than those in their 20s and 30s. It could be because they are free from the anxieties and pressures of early adulthood, that older people tend to view ageing far more positively than younger people.

One of the longest and most comprehensive studies of ageing in the world is the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which has been following 800 men and women from adolescence to old age for 75 years. It has shown that people over the age of 70 are less depressed than those who are younger. The paradox is "that fears of ageing are much stronger in early adulthood than among older people", notes Kendig. "Many will say it's the best years of their lives. Obviously there is individual variation but old age can be very fulfilling with good health and close relationships." In another decade, perhaps the image of surfing grandmothers (and grandfathers) will not seem quite so far-fetched.

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