

Healthy ageing more important than aged care, expert says

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Deep-seated ageism is at the core of our culture and at the heart of an unproductive government approach to healthy ageing, says Professor Hal Kendig, Director of the Ageing, Work and Health Research Unit in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Sydney.

Average life expectancy increased by 20 years during the 20th century and by the middle of the 21st century it is projected that one in four Australians will be aged over 65.

"But how healthy and satisfying will these 20 years be for people?" ask Professor Kendig and his Monash University collaborator, Professor Colette Browning.

In an October article published in the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia's Dialogues journal, Professor Kendig and Professor Browning said local and international research shows how earlier social interventions can yield returns later in life through generating greater independence, [health](#) and productivity.

Yet, they say, little government action is being taken in response to studies that show the inadequacy of a policy approach that only focuses on chronic disease and aged care in middle and later life.

The promise of a new 'Ministry in Ageing' a decade ago, for example, quickly became the 'Ministry for Aged Care', with scant attention being paid to social and policy influences on healthy ageing. And while the

Productivity Commission Report on Caring for Older Australians, released in August 2011, commends the 'wellness approach', progress in recommending ways to implement that approach has been limited.

Professor Kendig says a further problem is that older people are often used as scapegoats to argue for fiscal restraint and productivity increases to avoid encumbering [future generations](#). This creates tensions between 'economic development' and the 'perceived burden of ageing populations'.

However, change may be coming. A new generation of research is demonstrating that the processes of ageing can be improved with a range of 'bio-psycho-social' influences, with a particular focus on the social aspect of ageing. At an intergovernmental level, the United Nations has called for a 'society for all ages' that promotes healthy ageing to achieve global health goals.

"Part of this could involve understanding psychosocial influences on health to guide health promotion and encourage independence and wellbeing," say Professor Browning and Professor Kendig. "The problem is that doctors have limited time to work with patients to change the behaviours that often contribute to the onset of chronic disease and poor quality of life."

Nevertheless, Professor Kendig is optimistic about the prospects for change following the funding last year of the ARC Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research (2011-2017), which is led by the University of New South Wales, the Australian National University, and the University of Sydney.

Provided by University of Sydney

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