

Invited Editorial

Not there yet: A gerontologist's lament

To move straight to the point, I am concerned that Australia has snatched failure from the jaws of victory on ageing policy and time is running out to get the settings right.

Even with scarce research funding, we have abundant scholarly evidence, here and internationally, to inform astute policy decisions about ageing – arrangements that could not only ease the potential economic impact of significant population ageing but promise genuinely better futures for generations of older Australians to come.

What is more, there have been multiple reports by independent voices such as The Productivity Commission and The Grattan Institute – let alone large, private accounting firms and the Business Council of Australia – all pointing to clear and sensible policy directions that remain largely ignored.

A sense of history

Compared to most European countries and even the United States, Australia has established itself as a drowsy laggard when it comes to taking the action required to meet the challenges of an older population and the needs of its older citizens. Yet, as we entered the new century, a very different reputation seemed likely.

In 2001, then Minister for Ageing (note: not Minister for Aged Care), the Hon Kevin Andrews MP, presided over the publication of Australia's landmark *National Strategy for an Ageing Australia*. Subtitled *An Older Australia, Challenges and Opportunities for all*, it is sober reading for those acquainted with the broad policy framework around ageing.

Not only did it highlight the importance of 'a good match between service demand and supply across the care sectors to ensure that people receive the right type of care for their needs' [1]; at a broader level than aged care, it offered a long-term strategic framework, intended 'to be used as a blueprint' for the government's 'actions and decisions with respect to population ageing'.

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It is sober reading because the informed, coordinated blueprint it set out remains highly relevant, while action towards achieving it in any comprehensive way has faltered, almost grinding to a halt.

Gone are the efforts towards a cohesive and consistent whole-of-government approach that can focus on both society and individuals and adapt to the needs of all Australians, as we grow older.

With the exception of a handful of bright policy moments in the 17 years since – notably the *Living Longer, Living Better* aged care reforms of 2012, the expansion of home-based care, and the appointment of our first Age Discrimination Commissioner (Susan Ryan) in 2011 – we have seen only a mediocre piecemeal approach to population ageing, focused heavily on aged care, wrapped up and marketed to voters prior to elections.

Rising tensions

The current landscape lacks a positive horizon. Our long unquestioned faith in future has been severely challenged by economic pessimism in an uncertain new world order. There is real stress among younger generations striving to move ahead in difficult employment and housing markets.

The Government's Intergenerational Reports, with their avowed aim of limiting public expenditure, have raised the spectre of future generations having lifetime prospects worse than those of their parents.

Yet, substantial numbers of the current cohort of older people live with extreme disadvantage.

At the same time, there remain significant shortfalls of badly needed care that the 2018 budget initiatives only begin to address; while potential benefits from evidence-based services aimed at rehabilitation, recovery and reablement drift further beyond reach.

Attitudes and expectations are shifting, and there are signs of new, intergenerational tensions arising – alongside the traditional divides within generations around social class.

The pressures of uncertain and uneven economic growth, combined with the certainty of significant population ageing for decades ahead, are anything but surprising. Yet taking the opportunity for a stitch in time continues to elude us and increasingly so in the last five years.

Towards a new roadmap

Australia needs to shake off the ‘doomsday’ problem narrative around ageing and reframe longevity as a triumph for humanity. Ageing needs to be understood as a natural population transition that, for a rich country like Australia, can be managed constructively – without scapegoating older people or applying policies that inflict social deprivation on disadvantaged groups or future generations.

Ageing well is achievable for most people. Contrary to pervasive negative attitudes, ageing is not an immutable process of decline. Quality of life is generally at its peak after people enter later life, and as with all stages of life, adverse outcomes are usually improvable.

Two recent books published with the support of the ARC Centre for Population Ageing Research in collaboration with the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia [2,3] help to advance a more positive framework for meeting the challenges and grasping the opportunities of population ageing. Leading authors describe approaches including policy design, across topics as variable as economic security, health policy and indigenous disadvantage.

As a collection, they offer a coordinated approach around five broad themes that I have tried to articulate in the closing chapter of *Ageing in Australia* [4]:

- A life course approach – Investment in good health and education in childhood, with support through subsequent life transitions, provides the foundation for independence, productivity and well-being over the entire life course.
- Building the concept of ‘ageing well’ into every domain of life. This means actively investing in health promotion and disease prevention, and in recovery of capacities and regaining independence as health threats arise in later life. It also extends to social and physical environments – building design and urban planning, work and participation, family relationships, technology and lifestyle.
- A consumer-directed, home-based approach to care when needed – seamlessly joined across health and social domains and administered through integrated portfolios and levels of government.
- Fair and equitable responses to wealth and home ownership with continued investment in human capacities and breaking cycles of disadvantage over family generations.
- A rights-based approach underpinning all domains of life, building and protecting respect and dignity and rejecting ageism in all its myriad forms.

Some final comments

These are essential guiding themes but, as my own opportunity to contribute to this future comes to an end, I would like to add some specific personal hopes.

A bipartisan, whole of government approach to ageing is a necessity if we are to break the cycle of piecemeal, election-focused policymaking. Without a commitment to coordination, cooperation and communication within and between traditional government portfolios, Australia has little hope of changing its future prospects.

I would like to see some form of Office on Ageing within government – attached to one of the central departments, like Treasury or PM&C – to leverage the broad-based policies and ensure this coordination.

Reflecting this, the government needs a Minister for Ageing. Having a minister for ‘aged care’ sorely misses the point.

We need national goals on ageing well that measure things such as participation, additional years of disability-free life gained and well-being.

And we need a much, much broader research agenda – one that is clearly focused on improvable areas related to ageing – not just the aetiology of disease.

The other very important requirement is political will. Australia and Australian governments are well positioned to manage population ageing yet we have had almost two decades of underwhelming progress. I hope our governments can find that will so future generations can enjoy outcomes better than my own.

Acknowledgements

Due to my illness, I was unable to complete this editorial without assistance and I would like to thank Keryn Curtis for playing this role.

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