

CANBERRA CENTENARIANS: STATISTICS AND STORIES OF LIVING TO 100 IN THE NATIONAL CAPITAL

Friday, 2 August 2013

Canberra Centenarians

Our major event for this year was a day long forum to celebrate the centenary of Canberra in 2013 by focusing on centenarians.

There are around 44 centenarians in Canberra, out of a population of 380,000, so they are not as common as those of us who aspire to reach 100 might like. They offer important lessons about reaching extreme old age.

The day started with a welcome to country by 82-year-old Auntie Agnes Shea who reminded us that the traditional Indigenous welcome is always performed by elders and it ended with a 100th birthday macaroon cake for Canberra.

A summary of some of the major presentations at the forum follows.



Karin Anstey, ANU; Shane Rattenbury, ACT Minister for Ageing; Aldo Giurgola, 92, architect of Parliament House; Chris Hatherley, ACT President.

Summary of Forum

SESSION 1: THE STATISTICS ON CENTENARIANS

A Century of Centenarians: Living to 100

Bjorn Davis, Director of Demography, Australian Bureau of Statistics spoke about changes in Australia's population structure since Federation, as seen in the census. He noted that the ABS has been very careful not to describe ageing as just an aged care issue which is the way the media sometimes present it. Centenarians account for only 0.01 per cent of the Australian population while only two per cent are 85 to 99.

The Prospect of the Century

Heather Booth, Australian Demographic and Social Research Institute, ANU emphasised the importance of continued social engagement for a healthier longer old age. Marriage does not guarantee companionship at an older age since many people outlive their spouse. Friends can prove important but individuals need large friendship circles at younger ages if they are to have a 50 per cent chance that at least one lifelong friend will be alive on their 100th birthday.

What are the prospects of living to 100? For those born in 1950, it was 6 in 100 at birth for females and 3 in 100 for males. To increase these chances we need to reduce mortality at the oldest ages where there is an increasing greater concentration of deaths.

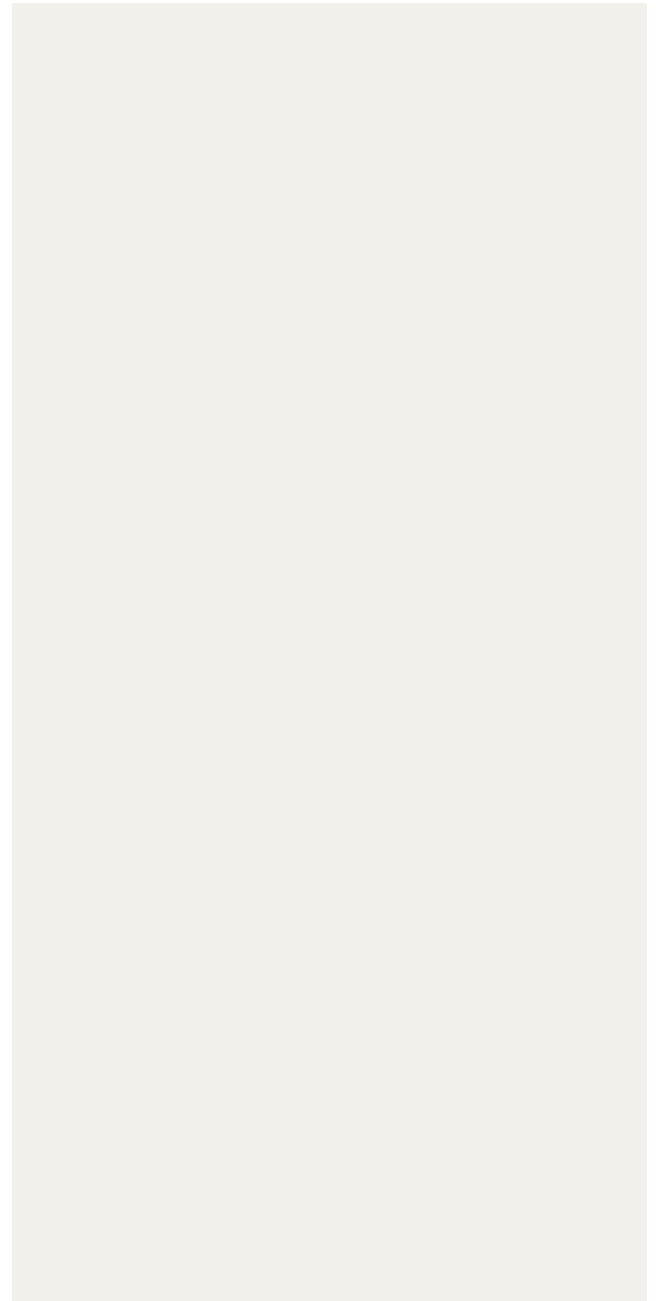
Summary of Forum

SESSION 1: THE STATISTICS ON CENTENARIANS

The Prospect of the Century – cont'd

The oldest Australian has lived to 114 years and 25 Australians have lived past 110. Australia now has around 2,600 centenarians, with 83 per cent being female. By 2029 there may be around 18,000, with 74 per cent being female. By 2050, there may be almost 60,000 centenarians or between 38,000 and 83,000.

Centenarians are a rare group but they are becoming less rare. A girl born today has a 16% chance of celebrating her 100th birthday. Numbers of centenarian will grow markedly but they will remain a small proportion of the population. By 2050 we are looking at 1,500 per one million people and three per cent of the population being aged 85+.



Summary of Forum

SESSION 2: THE SCIENCE: WHAT MAKES FOR HEALTHY BRAINS IN HEALTHY BODIES AT 100?

The Australian Centenary Study: Healthy brains at 100.

Professor Parminder Sachdev, Centre for Healthy Brain Ageing, UNSW, spoke about the Sydney centenarian study that has recruited people over the age of 95, looking at cognition and brain but also physical health and overall functioning in later life.

His role has been to examine the brains of people when they reach 100, researching what makes a brain shrink and the many changes that occur in later old age.

He noted there is a visible trend towards increasing rates of dementia of 60 to 70 per cent once individuals are over the age of 100. Nevertheless most participants in the Sydney study have reported satisfaction with their general health despite experiencing impairment in activities of daily living and some in this group being very frail and disabled. Asked what had been the best stage of their lives they said it had been around the age of 70.



From Left to Right: Heather Booth, Parminder Sachdev, Julie Byles.

Summary of Forum

SESSION 2: THE SCIENCE: WHAT MAKES FOR HEALTHY BRAINS IN HEALTHY BODIES AT 100?

The Australian Centenary Study: Healthy Brains at 100 – cont'd

The study has found significant shrinkage of the brain in all centenarians examined, in both white and grey matter, different lesions shrinking at different rates. Studies of the brain over a lifetime indicate atrophy in the hippocampus, the area that is important for memory, decreases with age, change being slight in the 60s and 70s and then increasingly more rapid. At the same time tangles, plaques and infarcts increase. Dementias in the aged are a combination of these pathologies.

Factors that affect the brain at the extreme end of life start from birth. Genes may be important in prolonging longevity but it has been

There are beneficial biomedical, behavioural and psychosocial factors associated with people in pockets of exceptional longevity – such as Okinawa, Sardinia, and the Seventh-Day Adventists in the US. Their lifestyles all feature putting family first, social engagement and diets. It is difficult to discover specific mechanisms responsible.

Summary of Forum

SESSION 2: THE SCIENCE: WHAT MAKES FOR HEALTHY BRAINS IN HEALTHY BODIES AT 100?

The Australian Centenarian Study: Healthy Brains at 100 – cont'd

Recent studies from the UK and Denmark indicate falling dementia rates there. However, there is an increased incidence of metabolic disease and it remains to be seen whether that will flow through to raise dementia.

The Australian Centenarian Study: Healthy Bodies at 100

Professor Robyn Richmond, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, UNSW covered the Australian centenarian study which has covered over 100 individuals 100 years and over from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, t

The study has looked at sociodemographics, medical history, personality and lifestyles. It has found that centenarians tend to look much younger than their actual age, drink moderately and are not obese. Only two have been current smokers and 60 per cent have been physically active, mainly through walking. Many still work, including one man practising as a lawyer. They have a wide variety of interests, do volunteer work and balance their finances.

Summary of Forum

SESSION 2: THE SCIENCE: WHAT MAKES FOR HEALTHY BRAINS IN HEALTHY BODIES AT 100?

The Australian Centenarian Study: Healthy Bodies at 100 – cont'd

Centenarians are examples of disease-free ageing with compression of morbidity to the last few years, so they are not a huge drain on the health care system. Centenarian patterns show that, the older you get, the healthier you have been and the possibility of a completely new pattern of positive ageing.

One reason for the centenarian phenomenon is the introduction of many public health measures in the 20th century. In 1905, more men than women were centenarians because many women died during childbirth.

Longevity is not a result of having avoided stress as most centenarians have experienced the same levels of stress as others but achieving maintaining an effective response to stress that has insulated them from psychological and physical damage. Centenarians generally have a positive, optimistic nature that protects. We know high anxiety levels disturb heartbeat,

Summary of Forum

SESSION 2: THE SCIENCE: WHAT MAKES FOR HEALTHY BRAINS IN HEALTHY BODIES AT 100?

The Australian Centenarian Study: Healthy Bodies at 100 – cont'd

immune function and blood clotting and lead to heart attack. The ability to overcome emotional setbacks is one of the most important factors of ageing successfully.

The longevity marathon is not about who can run faster but who can stay in the race as long as possible, with women now winning. Men face the steepest climb during their 60s and 70s due to cancer and heart disease but those who survive to their 90s have a low rate of heart disease, dementia and other diseases. Women in their 90s have not undergone the same selection process and have all levels of cognitive function.

A 108-year-old lady doing the very long questionnaire for the Australian centenarian study asked, 'How long is this going to take? I have my work to do as a volunteer at the local hospital to help out old people.' Centenarians are a force to be reckoned with.

Summary of Forum

SESSION 2: THE SCIENCE: WHAT MAKES FOR HEALTHY BRAINS IN HEALTHY BODIES AT 100?

Advanced Old Age as a Field of Research

Julie Byles, AAG National President and Centre for Gender and Aging, University of Newcastle noted someone now 100 would have had a life expectancy of 60 when they were born, so they have lived 40 years longer than expected. They have defied the odds. We want to understand centenarians to get insights into the biological factors that may provide a key to longer human lifespans.

Julie has been part of the Australian longitudinal study of women's health started in 1996 and still running. It included women then aged 70 to 75, many of whom said their health was excellent. The survivors are now 86 to 91 years of age and about 25 per cent are still involved in the research. Those who rated their health as excellent or good in the early stages were much more likely to be alive or to get into their 90s and still report their health as excellent or very good. Follow-up on these older women will benefit from accumulated data on their backgrounds.

Australia has the capacity to get substantial information on centenarians to take the stage alongside many other international studies.

Summary of Forum

SESSION 3: THE STORIES OF LIVING TO 100

Registering Long Lived Australians on the International Database on Longevity

Dr John McCormack, School of Health Sciences, La Trobe University has focused on super centenarians: people aged 110 years or more. The protocols of the International Database on Longevity meet Guinness book of records criteria. He maintains a list of centenarians in Australia which has quite a bit of turnover, with three quarters verified and he finds them mainly through word of mouth and also written records.

There are an estimated 350 super centenarians worldwide, with one per 1,000 centenarians in some countries, but there are only 61 validated individuals and 95 per cent of them are female. It seems only around 30 people have ever reached 116, with one third coming from Japan where counts of centenarians are released annually.

The oldest Australian male to date, Jack Lockett, who reached 114, served in both world wars, contradicting the imagined impact of trauma on age. As a farmer in the Mallee in Victoria he said no-one owned the land and you had a responsibility to look after it. Not being caught up in material goods was part of his personality that may have contributed to his longevity.

Summary of Forum

SESSION 3: THE STORIES OF LIVING TO 100

Registering Long Lived Australians on the International Database on Longevity – cont'd

Australia has four current validated super centenarians: Jane Grey 112, Vi Robbins 111 – the only one born in Australia, Ada Furby 110 and Ethel Farrel 110. There may well be two in nursing homes. Sister Madeleine died at 110 a few weeks ago. She was still engaging with another nun aged 105 down in Melbourne. Roy Charles, who died in Perth two years ago, reached 110 and was the last survivor of World War I.

John noted there had been some references to the longevity risk earlier in the forum but no mention of the longevity dividend - the good things we can get. People can probably work longer and save more. His social work course used to be the least popular but has come up in the ranks as more students have grandparents and seem to be interested in old age.

Video Portraits of Older Canberrans

The program also featured video portraits of five older local citizens from a film, *The centenarians: Embracing the coming of age*, directed by Kris Kerehona. The five were Linda Welch, 94; Marcus Quinlivan, 91; Margaret Lodge, 97; Aldo Giurgola, 92 and Elma Pearsall, 96, the oldest Ngunnawal person.

HOW LONG DO YOU EXPECT TO LIVE?

Forum participants were asked to estimate what age they might reach. Most did not expect to reach 100.

The votes were:

70-79: 5 per cent

80-89: 47 per cent

80-99: 35 per cent

100+ : 14 per cent

What would be your guess for yourself?