

When is a person old and when is a person considered to be old? They are two very different questions. Age seems to ambush us. It's not that we feel differently (apart from a few aches and pains that can be managed) but we are treated differently.

- Wendy Squires in the Age last weekend (14/11/15) had a silly unhelpful piece about getting older drivers off the road- having black boxes in their cars. Seniors were defined as 49 and over.
- Donald Hall, a writer for the *New Yorker* described an incident in a museum when he stopped to admire a sculpture by Henry Moore, after exiting a museum's cafeteria. He was in a wheel chair. A guard approached him, bent over, wagged a finger in his face and asked 'Did we have a nice din-din?' The question reeks with condescension. It's the tone you often hear in nursing homes when staff members speak to the residents.
- after a certain age it is not unusual to hear someone define our abilities by our age, or assume we can't contribute because we are too old, or we wouldn't understand because we're too old. That's age discrimination at work, and it's getting worse not better as more of us are ageing.

Life expectancy above 30 is a very modern phenomenon driven by public health measures and falling infant mortality. In 1800, 25% of males in Western countries would survive to 70. Today 90% will.

So as life expectancy has changed the structure of our lives has changed.

But we are still bogged down in the false perception that 50 is the beginning of old age. So we need to recast our definitions and talk about longevity rather than ageing

In the 'fifties Americans identified adolescents or teenagers as a group distinct from children, with special needs. It made sense developmentally to split childhood into two distinct groups - childhood and youth - as childhood was prolonged, with schooling extended, kids are living with parents longer, entering the workforce later, marrying later and their life expectancy has increased proportionally. In Western countries they can now be described as 'youth' or 'kidults' up to the age of 25.

Middle-age, like childhood and youth, is also now lived in two stages - early middle-age and late middle-age - with old age beginning at around 75 - for some but not all. Early middle-age (25-50) is when most venture out from the home they grew up in, to their own housing; they work, earn a living and lead independent lives. By 50 we know who we are.

Older middle-age (50 -75), is a time of maturity, when we have been broadened by our experiences. It is a time for reinvention and giving back to family and community, when we can find satisfaction in a range of activities.

There is research being done at Stanford University showing that ticking off the bucket list is ultimately unsatisfying if not accompanied by something with deeper and more sustained meaning. The most satisfying meaning involves commitments that contribute to other people or to making a positive difference on issues in the world that one really cares about. People who live this way live longer and more successful lives.

It is this late middle-age – not extended old age - that is a new phenomenon, one which is changing the nature of society as we know it. It is becoming an ‘age of creative transformation’ and a huge resource for the community as we refuse to accept the roles we are being cast into and reshape life as it has not been known before. We are making history.

Our assets include a better education than any previous generation, valuable work experience and wisdom still valid in the technological age, emotional intelligence derived from long social experience, housing security and accumulated wealth as productive workers and consumers. Baby-boomers are already countering expectations from families, from medicos and bureaucrats and in so doing they are changing the face of ageing.

Old age, as we have been used to thinking of it, not so long ago, does not set in until frailty sets in and the onset can vary for individuals by a decade or more. If we handle this new life structure sensibly then old age should be relatively short - a few years – not potentially half our life span.

Old age is a natural and inevitable stage of life which has its particular needs, as do the stages of childhood, adolescence, adulthood and our working years. And these needs should be seen as no more of a burden than childcare services, education services, gainful employment, health, disability and welfare services. At each stage of life the state provides essential services and tries not to scapegoat their recipients. Another day in the life of an elder should be seen as worthwhile as a day in the life of a young adult.

But social, medical and cultural policy has not caught up with this dramatic change in our life cycle and I am not simply talking about the need for health and care services. We live longer and contribute more when we have a positive attitude, when we are socially, emotionally and intellectually engaged.

Studies have found that, controlling for variables such as income, ill-health and divorce, those with a positive attitude to life, those who see ageing as an opportunity to re-invent themselves and get on with the business of living, people with curiosity and humour actually live more successfully in all respects. Demography and genes do not fully determine destiny. Lives can change and get better. This fact should be the basis of policy for ageing Australians.

We have got to stop talking about retirement and 'having a well-deserved rest'. It is well documented that for many, retirement leads to cognitive, emotional and physical deterioration. It can condemn us to unnecessary decline. We have got to stop talking about servicing the aged. They require facilitation to become self motivated and remain independent.

People in a late-stage career or living an active life after 55 still have much to give, even if they are not entirely sure what it may be. We need to think about Life Part 2, about redesigning and reinventing our long life journey.

We need to speak of, and design the longevity economy.

A growing body of research suggests that health and satisfaction in the second half of life are critically tied to education and engagement. We need to think about education as a life-long process. New learning experiences in our older years enliven the brain. Even for those with dementia.

Older people are just as diverse as children, and live in diverse households, yet because their image has become so stereotyped- seen as frail, demented and of little use or value - we lump them together as an homogenous group. It is easier to disregard them that way,

There are many false assumptions made about our ageing population with economists prosecuting a campaign blaming 'old' people for the high cost of housing, keeping families out of housing, rorting superannuation, responsible for rising health costs, budget deficits and youth unemployment and accidents on the roads. This wedge being driven between the old and the young is being engineered for political purposes and it is factually incorrect and extremely damaging in undermining well-being across all community groups. The old and the young have much to contribute to one another. The value of intergenerational workforces and mutual mentoring relationships is just becoming understood and appreciated.

Positive ageing policies are the way forward but this approach is being discredited by those with a vested interest in clinging to an outmoded service approach. They argue by promoting active ageing we are demeaning those who cannot be active.

According to studies performed by the American National Institute of Ageing, negative stereotypes about ageing can impact not only on how others view us, they also influence how elders view themselves and even adversely affect health and longevity. The image of the elderly as 'senile', 'frail', or confused, can become debilitating self-fulfilling prophecies. Seeing or hearing gloomy nostrums about what it is like to be old can make people walk more slowly, hear and remember less well, and even affect their cardiovascular system.

I examined the data on the claim that the aged are responsible for rising health costs. Not so. First misdiagnosis and 'over-diagnosis' are rife in medical system and with 15 minute medical assessments this is not an uncommon outcome. At another extreme the aged are being

marginalized by some health professionals so correct diagnosis is delayed and longer morbidity results.

In my case at 70 I discovered doctors didn't want to see me anymore. I was told by three different specialists, 'Don't come back'. So what was going on? This question set me thinking and led to my writing *In Praise of Ageing*.

It seems that after 70 the medical system sees us as expendable, we are deemed to have lived our expected life span. One medical solution - because we take up time and there are more and more of us - is to plug us full of pharmaceuticals to keep us quiet but they can interact and result in effects that in turn are diagnosed as the symptoms of old age. Old age is not a disease. The major increase in health costs results from the increase in population and the high cost of technology that I have documented in *In Praise of Ageing*. Obesity also is a huge contributor.

A second myth is that we are told repeatedly by economists, we are 'unproductive', a burden on society'.

The dependency ratio and productivity assumptions are based on a flawed formula that fails to measure caring and voluntary roles.

Not all of us will want to, or be able to work, but many people do want to work for social as well as economic reasons. But increasingly people are forced into involuntary retirement through redundancy or to take care of others, both older and younger. Ignoring this reality, the Government's solution to the 'crisis of ageing', is to say - 'Stay in paid work until 70 and take a pension or access superannuation later in life'.

Research shows older workers have economic value based on their experience that younger workers lack. They are more stable, more reliable: yet we are the first to be 'let go' and jobs are disappearing in the headlong rush to balance budgets, make profits and increase productivity. The human cost is ignored, but so too is the economic benefit of retaining experienced workers.

Alongside the changing nature of the workforce - to be more flexible, to accommodate part time work and the impact of globalization - the government's solution is no solution.

The workplace of the future will not only require technological skills. It is inter-personal skills that will be most needed and the late middle-agers have those in spades. Recent research has found that a 5% increase in workforce participation of people over 55 would add \$48 billion to the Australian economy.

It surprised me to know that according to the 2011 census those over 63 years in full-time work put in the longest hours. There is a high proportion of farmers and self employed in this group. In total there are 4256 Australians aged 65 plus working more than 80 hours a week (3). Our capability and commitment should not be in question.

Still we are told that by our staying in work longer, to ensure we have enough to live on, we are keeping the young out of work. Not so.

Recent employment figures, released by the ABS, show the economy is generating new jobs at a faster rate than any time since 2010. A healthy, productive economy needs to employ both age-groups, the experienced workers and the new learners. It's not as if a young worker will take the place of an older one pushed into retirement; it's not an assembly line we are dealing with.

Yet the situation is confusing. The Federal Government's Jobs' program which provided a \$10000 bonus for employing an older Australian has failed. 1700 people have joined the scheme meant to benefit 32,000. The jobs are not available they say. (The Age 8/11/15)

In this new age workers will need to plan their careers for change. More people (men and women) should be encouraged into employment with flexible hours. There are signs people are trying to take things into their own hands with an increase in small businesses and a change in direction through un-retirement and entrepreneurship. US Colleges are offering Programs for Transformation. We should learn from that model.

Some businesses are grasping the changes. For example late middle-agers don't want their financial advice from young masters of the universe and banks are hiring and retaining mature employees to service the interests of such customers. Bunning's stores employ older experienced 'tradies' to advise and help customers; an excellent example of experience applied for a new purpose. Older fashion models are being employed by brand names for customers who don't imagine themselves as skinny teenagers on the red carpet

Despite the way it has been promoted, the Inter-Generational Report (IGR) shows that ageing is not the problem the government maintains it is. By 2050 there will be two million more children younger than ten years, than was anticipated a decade ago. When they enter the workforce (provided the Government does its job, leading an economy that generates work opportunities) the ratio of old to young will not be problematic. This evidence flies in the face of the negative propaganda about the future harming economic growth, competitiveness, innovation and social progress.

Many economists make an assumption that if you are not in paid work you are a dependent. Another myth.

Productivity does not simply mean paid work. The GDP fails to measure the significant dollar-value of caring work, voluntary work, community work and creative work, without which our economy could not function, and none of which is a monopoly of the young. Treasury should do some sums on the social capital that volunteer work produces and how that impacts on our economy.

For example a million children are cared for regularly by grandparents while parents work. Overall volunteering contributes more than \$200 billion to the Australian economy - more than

mining, agriculture and the retail industry. We actually help keep Australia's economy ticking along.

And it's not just the direct economic contribution that helps: volunteering and caring actually help people live longer and better lives that are not a drain on the system. Older people represent a human capital asset that can improve the economy.

But a major challenge, to overcoming these negative attitudes and assumptions, is the media portrayal of the aged.

The recent report on housing by two demographers about the number of older singles staying in the family home was turned into a conflict by the media suggesting the researchers were saying the oldies should be kicked out. My friend Bob Birrell one of the authors received angry mail for days. He was the messenger stating the facts not an advocate against the aged. But conflict is a media mainstay in the stories they tell.

The narratives that interest the media are these.

- They report advocates who frame the debate about ageing by either showing idealistic representations of vibrant independent seniors or negative accounts that focus overwhelmingly on the problems and challenges associated with ageing.
- Their problem oriented stories rarely include solutions that can create more optimal outcomes for older adults and frequently suggest an impending demographic and social crisis, such as breaking the health system or creating a housing crisis
- The media often frame the problems associated with an ageing population as private concerns, while advocacy organisations point to the more public sources of those problems. Government is depicted both as the problem and the solution.

When the media and advocacy organisations fail to link successful ageing to policies that enable older adults to remain active and socially engaged, they actually reinforce the public's highly individualistic understandings of the ageing process. So people believe the likelihood of successful ageing is about lifestyle choices, rather than as affected by services, larger social structures, or public policies. People are more likely to view poor seniors, and those with chronic illnesses, as having made bad choices, and not in relation to social determinants.

- How to challenge negative propaganda and short-sighted thinking around ageing?
- How can we overcome and address these myths and facilitate the longevity 'revolution' as policy makers?

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Mark Butler's book *Advanced Australia The Politics of Ageing (MUP 2015)* provides a very good discussion of the issues. It shows he was a conscientious Minister; that the Gillard Government

did introduce some worthwhile policies but the balanced discussion didn't get much traction in the media.

It would be a start if Governments recognized old age does not begin at 50 and that policy needs to be designed around the fact we are living longer lives, that we will be fitter longer, want to work longer and want to be actively engaged in our communities. These are the objectives that require facilitation.

- Old age will be deferred for most people when we are living active lives and are no longer defined as useless. It will start around 85+ before long.

Medical guidelines for the dying must be improved. The Q&A on euthanasia showed how we do not like to speak about death and the medical system is focused on prolonging life as the objective when some individuals (and I am among them) would like to choose their time and circumstances of dying.

There are many significant ways in which the current health costs can be reduced.

It has been calculated that advanced care planning would save \$250 million annually.

We need a reassessment of definitions of mental disease. The American Psychological Association's diagnostic manual (which is applied in Australia) lists 374 disorders for depression with criteria so vague as to potentially include all of us. There are well researched publications challenging these wide definitions of mental illness, arguing psychiatry may be doing more harm than good. There is a lot of difference between bi-polar depression and having a bad day but all get lumped together as mental illness. (Nov 15, 2014, The Age, Cures making stressed workers worse, Nick Toscano).

Social isolation is understood to exacerbate all forms of dementia.

It is clear to live a long life well; the brain needs to be active and stimulated with rich and new experiences. And we should start early. Nonsense is talked about the dangers to youth of multi-tasking. There is no such thing as mono-tasking. The brain is inquisitive by design. What confounds the brain enlivens the brain. And computer games are now seen as a way of keeping the older brain alert.

Just as black people were not seen on television in diverse roles in the 60s and 70s, and women were ignored - unless they were sex objects featured on page three of Rupert Murdoch's papers, baring boobs and draped over cars and other products - older people as diverse and interesting characters are almost invisible in the general media population. We can and must change this.

We are growing in number, we have buying power and voting power. Women's Electoral Lobby made a difference to the status of women 40 years ago. Now it's time for EEL - Elder Electoral lobby.

Successful self-empowered longevity also means we must accept the responsibility for looking after ourselves to the best of our ability physically and mentally; that we make an effort to reinvent ourselves, our work and purpose as circumstances change over a long life. We must step up but it is not just a matter of self-responsibility.

Our attitude will make a difference but we have a right to be treated with dignity and empathy, not isolated and ignored, but as part of a community, given access (if we want it) to work opportunities (both paid and unpaid) and good medical support. The language used to talk about us, our cultural attitudes and media reporting, create negative perceptions and myths, which contribute to the destruction of our self respect and hope.

Just as we have fought against sexism and racism we must fight against ageism. Portrayals of the aged as a burden and a problem just do not help. Sensible policies can bring benefit to all of us. It's time to praise and celebrate longevity, and develop a nation for all ages – then the whole of society benefits.