Family and Community Development Committee Inquiry: Opportunities for Participation of Victorian Seniors

Submission prepared by

The Australian Association of Gerontology

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Executive Summary

As the leading professional body supporting ageing research, the Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) believes that building a robust evidence-base is an essential foundation upon which to develop ageing and aged care policies to best meet the challenges and opportunities of an ageing Victorian population.

In particular, the AAG believes that a government supported program of funding directed towards ageing research would assist in addressing gaps in the evidence-base. As gerontology requires a multi-disciplinary approach to research, any research program assisting the Victorian Government to identify opportunities for participation of senior Victorians would necessarily need to incorporate the broad spectrum of relevant ageing issues, including:

- Biological ageing;
- Demographic patterns;
- Social participation;
- Health and aged care;
- Cultural diversity and ageing;
- Ageism and social attitudes to ageing;
- An ageing workforce;
- People with dementia;
- Housing, the built environment and assistive technologies; and
- The economic impact of ageing.

Furthermore, there is a need for translating this research into meaningful policy and practice outcomes. This requires engaging with relevant stakeholders, including consumers, service providers, practitioners, researchers and policy makers, to identify key areas of research and models of best practice.

To effectively contend with Victoria’s ageing population for the benefit of all Victorians, now and in the future, support for collaborative, multi-disciplinary ageing research is required to successfully inform policy and practice outcomes.
Opportunities for participation of senior Victorians

The Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important Inquiry into the Opportunities for Participation of Victorian Seniors. The AAG is the leading national professional organisation committed to the promotion of gerontological research and the dissemination of relevant information to inform policy, practice and attitudes to ageing.

The inquiry’s Terms of Reference are well shaped to gather informed opinion on what issues senior Victorians may face over the coming decades. This includes the economic impact of the ageing Victorian population, ways in which older people will be able to effectively participate in society, and the impact of the ageing population on services for older people. The Inquiry also seeks input from a broad range of stakeholders and will include a review of national and international literature on preparing for an ageing society.

As the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference state, Australians are living longer and in better health than ever before; the ageing of the population as a consequence of the success of increased longevity and compressed morbidity will present both challenges and opportunities for Victoria. While there has been much discussion around the economic burden of an ageing population in the popular press, it also presents opportunities for governments, businesses, as well as individuals. Governments prepared to invest in building age friendly societies will reap benefits in attracting baby boomers moving into older age who are searching for options that allow them to live in the community leading healthy, active lifestyles for as long as possible. This requires age friendly housing, adequate public transport, safe footpaths and pedestrian crossings, access to aged care services, and so forth. Likewise, businesses will need to cater for a more visible older population and social attitudes towards ageing will need to embrace a more positive image of ageing in line with the potential of older people to lead active and productive lives well into retirement. There are new and emerging markets which have the potential to be tapped and for Victoria to become a leader in these fields, including design, service innovations and new approaches in both healthy ageing and community and residential care.

The AAG believes that a well developed and robust evidence base is a critical foundation for the design and implementation of policies and programs to meet the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population. The AAG is committed to continue working to further develop this evidence base and its translation into practice and policy.

Ageing Research – improving the experience of ageing for Victorian seniors

Gerontological enquiry recognises the complexity of ageing and the multi-factorial causality of age-related health and decline. Ageing research demands a cross-disciplinary approach, building capacity in medical, psycho-social, nursing, allied health, environmental and technological areas. While the outcome of ageing research is the wellbeing of the general population of older adults, there may also be a need to examine ageing across the whole life span. In addition, improving the lives of seniors also has positive benefits for the community as a whole.
Against this broad and varied effort, an ageing research program will need to be appropriately focused. This will involve targeted medical, health science, building design, and social and economic research that examines socio-biological factors promoting healthy ageing, including mental and physical activity, social participation, activity and support, good nutrition, education, the local environment and social capital. It also needs to develop the evidence base in relation to chronic and complex conditions that influence the ageing trajectory for many older people and their informal carers. Despite a strong focus on primary care and healthy ageing, it is the reality that a proportion of older people, especially those over 85 years of age, will be disabled, ill or dying, and thus research into appropriate care and workforce needs is essential.

There is an urgent need to build Victoria’s capacity in ageing research. A strong research and development focus, supporting skill development and career opportunities for researchers will provide a state-wide resource to effectively address the needs of an ageing population over the coming decades. For successful research outcomes it will be necessary to harness existing expertise as well as promoting and funding the development of additional expertise.

A research program that builds capacity within the ageing research community and funds inter-disciplinary research is essential for addressing both the opportunities and challenges of an ageing population and for informing relevant policies and programs for the benefit of not only older Victorians but the whole community.

**Key research areas to be addressed**

While the health and wellbeing of older people is obviously an important area of study for researchers of ageing, there must also be research into the care and support needed for those who care for older people. There has been very limited study or quantification of the burden on carers, who are vulnerable to stress, depression, poor health as well as considerable social and economic loss.

Furthermore, there is a need to challenge ageist social attitudes that persist and focus instead on aspects of positive and productive ageing; that is, research is required into the ways older people continue to live rich and rewarding lives that contribute to the social fabric of Victorian communities. Ageing is not only about health and degeneration; it is also about growth and productivity. This is especially true at the present time where we now have two generations of older people, the baby boomers and their parents.

The need for evaluation and monitoring of policies, programs and interventions to provide soundly based information on both beneficial and harmful social and health outcomes must be a foundation of all ageing research. The AAG believes that the following areas of research will assist to advance understanding in ageing and develop a robust evidence base, thus allowing policy makers to make informed decisions on health and ageing policies and programs for the benefit of all Victorians.

These theme areas include:
Biological ageing
- Multi-disciplinary research into the complex causation, prevention and clinical management of the common multi-factorial “Geriatric Syndromes” (gait instability and falls, acute confusional state and delirium, cognitive decline and dementia, slowing and reduced mobility, incontinence, depression) that create co-morbidity, prolong length of stay in acute care and increase disability following acute systemic illness.
- Trials of multiple interventions in multi-factorial age-related syndromes; this includes combining physical, social and mental activity with medication screening and environmental safety measures.
- Preventive research into complex inter-related causes of the cognitive and mobility disorders of old age, where knowledge lags well behind prevention of the systemic diseases (heart, lung, cancer etc) e.g. dementia prevention models combining anti-oxidants, mental stimulation, vascular preventives, physical activity and social involvement in mild cognitive impairment to delay dementia onset.
- Biological research into the mechanisms that cause the common primary neurodegenerative processes affecting cognition and mobility (primary age related neuronal loss unrelated to known mechanisms - vascular, metabolic, toxic, inflammatory, infective etc).

Demographic patterns
- Population health research that addresses responses to geographic and demographic patterns of ageing specifically related to Victorian communities.
- Special needs groups in the ageing population, including people with disabilities, those living with a mental health condition, and those living in isolated communities.
- Population health research that addresses community responses to ageing issues e.g. advanced care directives, very old people living alone, isolation and depression, suicide, carer support, access to health and allied services, access to transport and strategies for intervention.
- Issues around family and informal care and the effect of demographic change on the capacity for informal care.

Society and ageing
- Research into the extent, availability and importance of social support and social interaction and its relevance to the older community
- Understanding the lifestyles of older Australians and their evolving needs for support services, including the needs of diverse groups of older people, such as, for example, older gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people.

Health and aged care
- Targeted healthcare services and workforce research examining healthcare systems for older people within, and that can be integrated across, all settings, including at home, in the local community, acute hospitals, rehabilitation/functional recovery and residential care.
- Models of care and different workforce requirements (including associated educational and skills requirements) that are best able to support older people.
- Care, generally (as opposed to treatment and cure), with a focus on better integrated care systems that maximise function and independent living.
- Better understanding of how to effectively support and maintain informal carers.
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- Development of an agreed set of outcome measures, both quantitative and qualitative, for measuring the impact of aged care and the development of early intervention services.
- Understanding the support and service needs of older people living with mental illness/a mental health problem.
- Equitable access to health services and treatments that are appropriate to the needs of older people, and prevention of age-discrimination in service provision.

Cultural diversity and ageing
- Aboriginal ageing research, with particular emphasis on the structural inequities that have resulted in a lack of advanced ageing in Aboriginal communities, and on appropriate models of care.
- Research into the development of culturally specific care, particularly where English is not the first language as serious communication problems may be encountered where the carers cannot communicate effectively which may ultimately impinge on the older person’s mental health and quality of life.
- Consideration of the importance of spiritual and religious systems in the lives of older people.

Ageism and social attitudes to ageing
- Societal monitoring of cohort change, social attitudes and values (and how they do and can change and influence behaviour).
- Research into the aspirations and resources of baby boomers as they will have improved capacity to self-manage their own health, to self-manage chronic illness when it occurs, and to use the health and aged care systems more effectively than previous generations.
- Community education on the positive aspects of ageing, including expectations that good health and good opportunities can be achieved by older people owning their own futures, by businesses and communities creating opportunities for older people, and by governments fostering the vision of positive and productive ageing.
- Enabling older people to participate fully in making decisions about their health and care, including advance care directives.
- Research into how to make the most of the opportunities afforded by the growth in our older population, such as the potential for mentors, carers, and volunteers.

Ageing workforce
- Understanding the role of older individuals in the workplace, flexible working options, barriers such as age discrimination, physical and mental health, skills training, and retirement planning.
- Redesigning work to utilise the skills of older workers appropriately and reduce early retirements.

People with dementia
- Research into the causes of dementias, including biomarkers and genetic tests, and treatments, including pharmacological treatments and complimentary therapies.
- Assessment of the care needs of people living with dementia (both in the community and in dementia-specific aged care facilities), as well as the needs of carers who are often placed under great physical and mental strain with little respite.
Housing, the built environment, and assistive technologies

- Investigating the housing needs of older Victorians, including stock and availability, age-friendly universal design, and alternative care and accommodation choices beyond the current paradigm of residential aged care facilities.
- Considering alternative models to institutional residential aged care that have and are being developed in other parts of the world, e.g. Green Houses in the United States and the Humanitas model used in the Netherlands.
- Addressing issues of older people and homelessness, including mental health and dental hygiene.
- Research into patterns of transport usage and health and community care services uptake amongst older people and projected levels of demand.
- Research into the development and application of new technologies assisting older people to live independently for longer.
- The use of social media and its role in keeping older people connected with their community; this would include providing access and education to older people about the use of computers/internet etc.

Economic impact of ageing

- Estimating the resources required by an ageing population and exploring how these resources can be provided by the individual, the community and the State.
- Understanding the particular needs of the financially disadvantaged and how those with few resources can best make the transition to a positive later life.
- Research into financial independence of older people and their capacity to pay for a healthy and satisfying old age, as well as to manage the costs of increasing dependence and assistance.
- Analysing the impact of the global financial crisis on people’s financial plans and retirement intentions and what this will mean for the Victorian economy more broadly in terms of support and the current and future capacity of individuals to make a financial contribution towards a sustainable health and aged care system.

Key aspects of an ageing research program

Quality evidence based ageing research is essential for informing policy and practice. To be successful, a comprehensive ageing research program requires a number of key elements. In particular, a successful ageing research program must:

- Be inter-disciplinary to ensure that knowledge gains have value in informing constructive action;
- Encourage participation by key stakeholders (consumer advocate organisations, NGOs, government agencies, industries and services, older people) in the development, conduct, and application of research;
- Emphasize positive outcomes - how to maximize the benefits of ageing as well as how to prevent or ameliorate negative aspects of ageing;
• Be of sufficient quality and appropriate scale and continuity to bring together collaborative teams and build substantial bodies of knowledge;
• Incorporate mechanisms for dissemination and translation of research findings to increase the uptake and application of knowledge by policy makers and practitioners; and
• Include mechanisms for evaluating the social and economic costs and benefits of research undertaken.

Additionally, to ensure that an ageing research program is able to achieve its full potential, the following is required:

• Funding for new analyses of existing datasets in order to make important findings available more quickly and to make better use of the substantial investment in current data collections. This includes resources to make existing datasets more widely available to build emerging researcher capacity in ageing research.
• Support for longitudinal studies analysing existing and future matched datasets to provide information on trends and differences between age cohorts.
• Regular publication by government of key data collections and easy access to these.
• Collection and analysis of cross-sectional surveys, which provides ‘social monitoring’ of change, associated with individual ageing, cohort succession, and social change.
• Collection and analysis of prevalence data regarding conditions such as dementia, social phenomena, such as elder abuse and carer wellbeing to assess the need for and effectiveness of current and future health promotion, policy and program initiatives.
• Funding by government and non-government organisations to support students and emerging researchers in ageing in order to build capacity within the ageing research sector.

Conclusion

Ageing research must be a major focus in developing opportunities for participation of senior Victorians. Policy and programs supporting older Victorians need to be supported by a robust evidence base that includes collaborative, cross-disciplinary ageing research and has input from a wide range of stakeholders. It is to be expected that the priorities and key tasks will change over time in light of new data, new technologies, medical advances, changing social trends and improved overall population health. It is important, therefore, that avenues of research remain flexible and capable of turning attention to new needs and circumstances as they arise.

The AAG has a strong focus on ageing research and education across many fields. Its members have considerable expertise in both in-depth medical, biological, psychological, environmental and social research, as well as in cross-disciplinary projects. The Association welcomes the opportunity to contribute to further development of the *Inquiry into the Opportunities for Participation of Victorian Seniors*, both now and in the future.