

THEY'RE NOT DOING BAD FOR THEIR AGE: AGEING, LEISURE AND ACTIVE LIVING¹

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An increase in life expectancy is a global phenomenon and something accompanied by a proliferation of terms such as successful ageing, healthy ageing, active ageing and positive ageing. This new consciousness about ageing is revolutionising the meanings and images attached to ageing and older people themselves are becoming the active agents in the reconstruction of old age (e.g., Conway & Hockey, 1998; Feldman & Poole, 1999; Phillipson, 1998). In spite of the negative overtones about growing old, those in their later years aren't the dead weight of society (Chamberlain, 2002). Have you ever wondered why older people are frequently referred to as a dead weight, a burden to society, a problem? Surely there is nothing to fear about growing old! When expressing her thoughts about turning 40, Zoe Heller (2004) captured the beliefs of many when she stated: "Why is it traumatic to be 40 I keep asking myself. I'm rather fitter – and God knows a lot happier than twenty years ago. Yet I find it hard to think of 40 as anything other than the gateway to old age" (p. B5).

The majority of older people are fit and well, live independently and are actively engaged in their community. Therefore, it's not surprising many contemporary writers talk about how the later years should be seen as much as a time for growth and development as decline and despair (e.g., Atchley, 1999; Blaikie, 1999; Faircloth, 2003; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Greenwald, 1997; Kirkwood, 2001; Kleiber, 1999; McPherson, 1998). Nevertheless, we cannot overlook how the negative perspective and prevalence of age discrimination has been a significant impediment for many in their later years and detracted from what this phase of life could and should be (e.g., McPherson, 1998; Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Schulz & Salthouse, 1999). However, the time has come to view ageing in a more constructive way and in so doing liberate people in their last 10, 20 or 30 years of life from the negative effects of the labels – ageing, aged and old (Atchley, 1999).

When mentioning old, older adults, later life or ageing in this paper I am referring to *them*, people who have been living for 65 years or more. I have chosen to use the term *them* because much that is written about *them* and policy and programmes that are developed for *them* have typically been created without the voices or opinions of *them*. In this context *them* is a derogatory term and highlights erroneous beliefs about ageing. Although citing a chronological point to define *them* is problematic, 65 is a commonly used indicator in the study of ageing as well as a reference point for some age-related policy.

In this adapted version of my Inaugural Professorial Lecture I comment on three things; first, how the portrayal of later life has been both misunderstood and misleading; secondly, I make reference to the predicted changes in the structure of

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the population in New Zealand with particular reference to those over 65 years and, finally, I share a few thoughts about leisure, and in particular physically active leisure, in the later phase of life – a scholarly interest of mine.

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

When presenting the 2001 BBC Reith Lecture series titled *The End Of Age: Why Everything About Ageing is Changing*, Tom Kirkwood noted:

We face a revolution in longevity that is shaking the foundations of societies around the world and profoundly altering our attitudes to life and death. Not only are we living longer, but the evidence of recent decades shows that old age itself is being transformed...We need to look afresh at what is happening for there is a great deal that needs to be done to develop a more positive attitude to the challenge of ageing if the successes of the past are not to turn sour...We now know that the hopes for a longer and better life are not only justified but real. We are born to live, not die. (pp. ix-x)

I like Kirkwood's comment because it offers a refreshing twist to the way ageing has been typically represented. Although this point of view is gradually becoming more accepted, authors and policy makers still tend to make reference to the negative images of ageing when introducing their work. I provide four examples to illustrate the point.

The first example is from research. When reporting on *The Berlin Ageing Study* the researchers made a strong assertion in their introduction about how the literature on ageing has been replete with information about declining intellectual abilities and physical health, social isolation and inactivity, economic insecurity and social dependency (Baltes & Mayer, 1999). They also argue that for too many years ageing has been viewed mostly in medical and biological terms, preoccupied with focusing on despair and frailty, the struggles of later life and concerns about the cost to society. This emphasis on the negative raised the curiosity of many researchers as to why more time isn't spent focusing on the opportunities that ageing affords and what it means to live and grow old in a rapidly changing social and political environment.

The second example comes from a book that Elizabeth and Charles Handy (2002) wrote about how 29 older women reinvented themselves. All the women spoke of their hopes for the next decade, a time when they would be free to engage in more things that had been postponed for too long. In the introduction Handy and Handy (2002) stated:

Society's stereotypes linger long ... It was Joan Bakewell who described a visit to a children's ward in the hospital where she met a little girl who was playing with a doll. The doll had crinkly grey hair, spectacles on the end of her nose, dull coloured clothes and was wearing slippers. "Who's the doll" Joan asked and the girl said "Oh, it's granny". "But I'm a granny" Joan said. "Look at me, this is what grannies look like. We wear high heels and have nice clothes. I'm a granny and I go to work and go to the gym and I've just bought myself a sporty red car. (p. 17)

Handy and Handy went on to say that more examples like Joan must be shared in the public arena if we are to persuade society, including the doll makers and others who provide representations of older people, that the world of ageing has changed. Although people categorise things, including older people, in order to make sense of them, why not cast the later years with much more diversity and better represent the reality of ageing?

The third example considers the way older people are frequently represented in children's books. In a study of the ways that older people were depicted through texts and pictures, Steinberger (2004) found the "stereotype of the old doddering grandparent persists ... and the lifestyle of grandparents and their role in the family is outdated" (p. 4). He argues that our children should be reading about the "pottering around the home grandparent" as well as "the working grandparents, the grandparents being active in community affairs, the hobbyists, the sporty and farming grandparents, the real grandparents who lead active, fulfilling and independent lives" (p. 6). Examples of this are seen in Helen McKinlay's *Grandma's Week Off* and Margaret Wild's *Sea Secrets*. These two stories are written by New Zealand authors and aptly illustrate that there is no need for grandparents to continually succumb to the roles they have traditionally been assigned.

My final example makes reference to our government's interest in ageing. In 1997 a Prime Ministerial Task Force produced a report titled *Facing the Future*. This provided the foundation and initiative for the Positive Ageing Strategy that was launched in April 2001 (New Zealand Ministry of Social Policy, 2001). You may wonder why such a strategy needs to be developed. The answer is quite simple. Positive ageing is about positive living and too many older New Zealanders have been inundated with a rhetoric more closely associated with a decline and degeneration that seems inevitable with ageing. Hence, the purpose of this strategy is to focus on the potential growth and development that lies ahead. This includes finding ways to overcome the barriers to ageing and improve the participation of all older people in their respective community in ways to which they are entitled. However, achieving a sudden societal change in attitudes towards ageing will be extremely difficult.

The background to each of these examples highlights what Thornton (2002) referred to as the way "the myths of ageing perpetuate false images of being old and stereotype ageing individuals" (p. 301). They also illustrate how "older people can be displaced from their communities into situations of being undervalued, unproductive and dependent" (p. 303). In essence, older people have typically been situated in ways that:

- they are the recipients of much prejudice and placed on the margins of society;
- the social and cultural meanings attached to *them* have been less than favourable and are a hindrance to personal development, identity and lifestyle; and
- views about ageing have been dominated by the progressive and degenerative process at the expense of other aspects of life, and negative images of ageing have infiltrated public opinion, thoughts about policy development and the attitudes of young and old alike.



Don't be fooled by what you see. (Photograph: Susan Chapman)

In spite of the rather gloomy past we are beginning to celebrate rather than rue the richness and diversity of the ageing experience. It is apparent that greater numbers of older people are quietly by-passing and resisting the negative expectations and stereotypes of what growing older is supposedly about (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). This resistance is at the heart of the Positive Ageing strategy, and is being driven by older people themselves. The actions of many, and not only the well resourced, suggest that contemporary “lifestyle evokes a transition to a new life, rather than a continuation of the old” (Blaikie, 1999, p. 73). In many ways ageing is being redefined and, rather than being ‘over the hill’, Greenwald (1997) argues increasing numbers of *them* are ignoring the images of the past and taking the hill by storm. Like the younger generations, older people are malleable and able to adjust to the physical and social challenges they confront on a day-to-day basis. Of course, they also need to be resilient for many feel denigrated and vulnerable in a society that tends to place more emphasis on the younger generation while disregarding the significance of those in later life.

In addition to personal characteristics, the positive ageing experience is also influenced by the way older people themselves interact with and negotiate the many forces in relationships, stereotypes and prejudices, economic conditions, social and cultural expectations, living arrangements and job opportunities. The evidence suggests that these forces take on greater significance with age because related inequalities experienced in earlier life tend to be accentuated in the later years – particularly for women (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Stoller & Gibson, 2000). Without wanting to belittle the significance of the struggles many endure, there are signs of change, albeit slow, and much of this is generated from within the aged themselves. In this regard I would consider the actions of groups such as Age

Concern, 60 Plus, Probus, U3Age, Grey Power and Senior Net as a few of the exemplary examples of empowerment by *them* for *them*.

A CHANGING POPULATION

Over the next several decades the size of the older population (i.e., over 65 years) will dramatically increase (see Figure 1). Currently this age group accounts for approximately 475,000 of the population in Aotearoa New Zealand and this is expected to be 566,000 in 2011 (12% of the population) and 1.18 million by 2051 (almost 25% of the population). The over-80-year-olds is the fastest growing group within this cohort and increasing at rate of around five per cent per annum (New Zealand Ministry of Social Policy, 2001). A number of factors contribute to the changing structure of the population including a reduction in fertility, a decrease in morbidity as well as advances in medical technology, health-care systems and increasing attention to lifestyle behaviours. There's little doubt that the doubling of the older population over the next few decades will have a significant and unprecedented impact on all aspects of society including availability of appropriate resources and services, social and economic consequences, housing and trends in the labour force (United Nations, 2002). It is, therefore, not surprising the ageing population is attracting the attention of politicians, entrepreneurs, researchers, public commentators, community groups and the like.

Demographic projections of a rapidly increasing older population often raise anxieties about how providing support for this sector of the population will impact on the economy of the country. Blaikie (1999) signalled a concern when suggesting it is through both the pension and consumption that later life is very closely linked to the economy. This becomes particularly obvious in New Zealand when considering changes to the cost of national superannuation for the over 65 population since its inception (see Table 1). The trend shown in Table 1 will continue and pose greater challenges for the policy and decision-makers in the future. For example, consider the impact on national superannuation in 2011 when there are an additional 91,000 people over 65 years old and by 2051 when it is projected there will be a further 1.18 million people in this age group. These changes will impact on government policy and raise questions about how the public sector will continue to sustain appropriate levels of support for *them*. Future growth in the older population is going to be expensive and it is possible that the provision of services, particularly in terms of health care, could represent a fast growing area of employment (Atchley & Barusch, 2004).

Table 1. Cost of Government Superannuation 1950 – 2004

Year	Cost
1950	\$1.9 million
1960	\$8.5 million
1980	\$1.3 billion
1990	\$4.7 billion
2004	\$5.5 billion

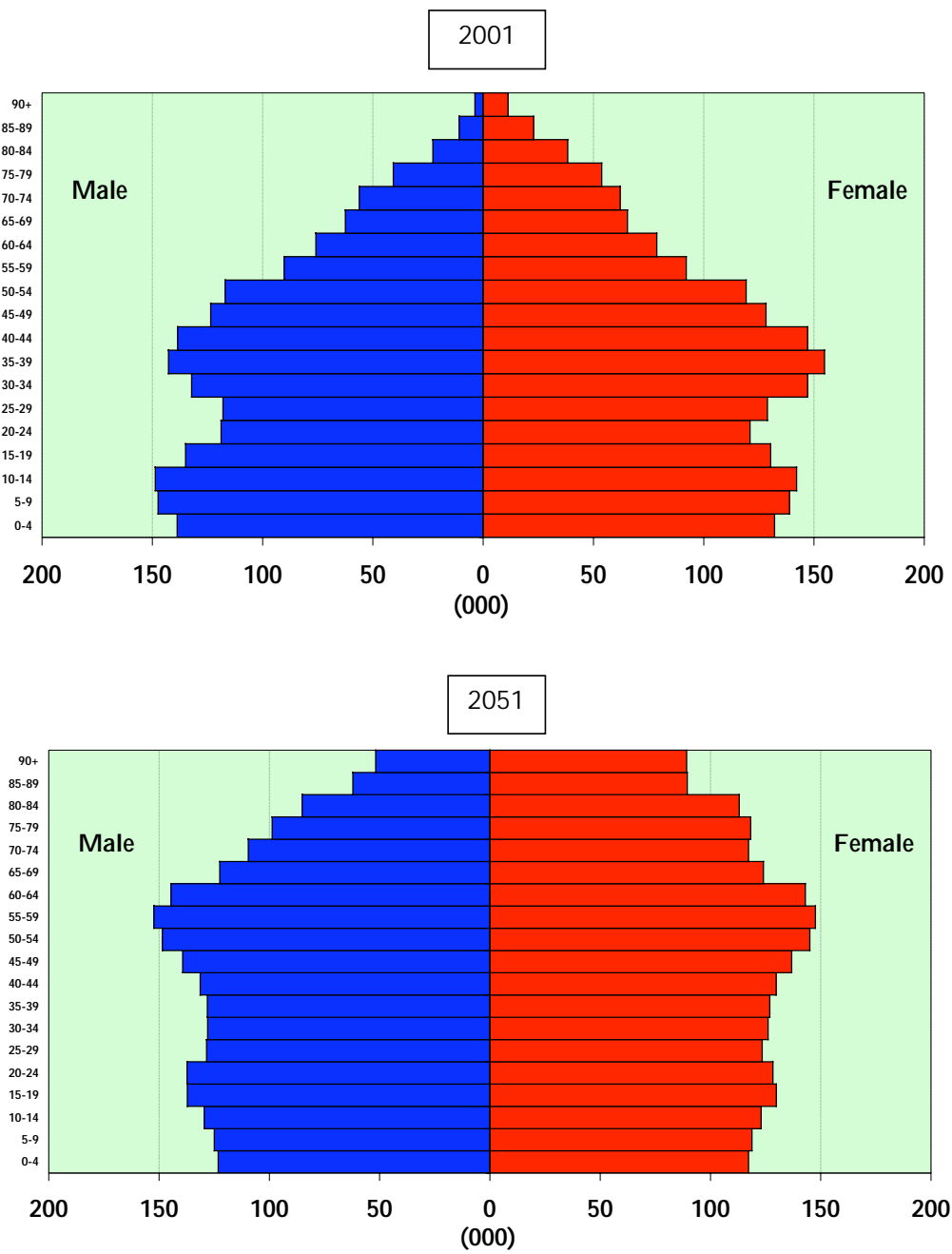


Figure 1. Comparison of New Zealand's population structure 2001 and 2051

It is not uncommon to hear expressions of concern, mostly related to the fiscal matters, from a range of governmental departments. On the other hand, groups such as insurance brokers, advertisers and entrepreneurs are inspired by the growth of an ageing population as they endeavour to capture a niche market and make a profit from the aged. By way of contrast to the fiscal aspect of ageing, the social and cultural implications remain largely unexplored except in regards to policies and programmes designed specifically for *them*. Decisions are often made for *them* based solely on the basis of age and, in many cases, the physiological competency of the ageing body (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Irrespective of the intentions and/or appropriateness of such developments, Neugarten (1982) warned that because:

policies and programmes aimed at the old have been intended to compensate for inequalities and disadvantage, they could unintentionally lead to age segregation, or reinforcing the misrepresentation of the old as a problem group and of stigmatising rather than liberating older people from the negative effects of the label old. (p. 27)

LIVING LONGER, GROWING OLDER

Until the later part of the 20th century our views about ageing were primarily influenced by a perspective grounded in pathology. Although greater emphasis is now placed on reducing both morbidity and mortality there is still a great deal to be learned about how the body and its many systems succumb to molecular wear and tear and the gradual accumulation of cellular defects (Kirkwood, 2001; Perls & Silver, 1999). But, in order to get to grips with the inevitable longevity revolution in the broadest sense, there is strong support for the notion that we extend our vision about growing old as well as rethink much of what is known about ageing and the ageing process (e.g., Baltes & Mayer, 1999; Blaikie, 1999; Feldman & Poole, 1999; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Kirkwood, 2001; Rowe & Kahn, 1998).

It is probable that many of our beliefs and deeply ingrained preconceptions may not be as accurate as once thought. An example of this relates to the changing views about the relationship between one's genetic disposition and longevity. Genes are critical to who and what we are but, as Kirkwood (2001) and others have noted, they only account for approximately one quarter of how long the majority of people will live. Given that the influence of a person's genetic disposition is less than previously thought, this raises the question as to what accounts for the remainder. Longevity is determined by a complex combination of nutrition, lifestyle and environmental factors as well as an array of unforeseen circumstances. The first three factors are subjected to constant intervention at the political, community, family and personal level and at any given point in the life course the resulting consequences could affect the ageing process in either an enabling or disabling way.

While the process of ageing may be universal, the experience of ageing differs for each person. For many the later years have the potential to be experienced as a new evolving stage of the life cycle – an open-ended development in its own terms (Friedan, 1993). Over time ageing has become recognised as more complex, differentiated and ill-defined, and is experienced from a variety of perspectives and expressed in numerous ways. Rather than viewing ageing as a process of disengagement from the main currents of social

life, one constructed out of welfare and lack, it is necessary to situate ageing as a central constituent in the cultures of our times (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). This draws attention to considering how those in later life spend their lives.

LEISURE – DOES IT MATTER?

What has leisure got to do with the longevity revolution? Given that there is a belief the next generation of *them* will be in better health, more educated, more leisure literate and have access to more disposable income, then the role of leisure does matter. When opening the 1997 International Congress on Healthy Ageing and Physical Activity, Ilona Kickbusch from the World Health Organisation recognised the enormity of the challenge that lies ahead when saying:

Isn't it strange that when we are faced with one of the greatest successes of humankind, that is a longer and healthier life, we still tend to define ageing as a problem and a crisis in financial terms and a problem for medical care systems and social solidarity....Aging should be considered a triumph for modern societies, a reason for celebration rather than commiseration....All our creativity is needed to move us ahead in the 21st century, to turn ageing into an opportunity for the individual and society....When we talk about older persons we are talking about ourselves in the future. (p. 24)



Old age is a time of life for which all else is preparation. (Photograph: Susan Chapman)

Leisure is associated with creativity and freedom or free time and has a significant role to play in later life. If growing older results in more freedom; that is, from labour, from dependents, from constraining roles, then it's reasonable to assume when you become one of *them* life must be replete with greater opportunities for leisure. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. Leisure does not just happen and,

irrespective of the amount of freedom or free time one supposedly has, free time by itself is insufficient to ensure an increase in leisure (e.g., Atchley, 1999; Kelly & Freysinger, 2000; Kleiber, 1999). To be of benefit, freedom requires a certain creativeness, discipline and sense of personal responsibility. However, it can be argued that while having more discretionary time provides opportunities for engagement in leisure, too much time can also induce a feeling of uselessness and loss of purpose (Grant & Stothart, 1999). An increase in freedom or having more discretionary time can be a predator for some while for others it is something to be treasured (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This reflects a difficulty in conceiving a world oriented towards the consumption of leisure when leisure is considered as anything other than self-indulgence (Blaikie, 1999).

Over 60 years ago Huizinga (1947) claimed the highest form of human behaviour is found not in work but in leisure. When discussing this in relation to the transition from employment to retirement and entering the later phase of life, Sheeran (2004) stated:

It's all very well saving for retirement and arriving at 65 with a nest egg that will see you kept in at least modest comfort. But what most people are not doing is planning for the huge change in lifestyle that retirement can bring. What we are seeing now are many cases of people from responsible well-paid jobs and a busy fulfilling life suddenly falling into the black hole. People need to be thinking about what the change in lifestyle might mean. (D5)

The desire to know more about the role and meaning of all aspects of ageing, including leisure, in the later years is gaining momentum and attracting considerable interest from researchers in social gerontology. The ageing and leisure literature draws on a variety of disciplines and theoretical perspectives and suggests leisure behaviour in later life might well be as diverse as ageing itself. It appears that chronological age per se is not a good predictor of leisure behaviour. Nevertheless, there are a few key trends to emerge from the research over the past 15 years and these provide a useful framework for guiding future policy, research and programme development. However, these trends should be interpreted with caution given the heterogeneity of the over 65 population and the expectation that this cohort will become even more diverse in their interests:

- the socially constructed beliefs and values about how an older person should behave have a strong influence on what an individual will and will not participate in;
- the likelihood of taking up new activities diminishes with age particularly if the activity requires learning new and complex skills – it takes time to develop skills in order to ensure an appropriate degree of self-satisfaction;
- previous experience by itself is not necessarily as reliable a predictor of leisure behaviour in later life as once thought;
- men have more trouble than women adjusting from the *world* of employed work to a *world* of leisure;
- as one ages the most frequent leisure activities remain relatively stable because they require little effort, tend to be inexpensive and occur within or close to home;

- the consumption of passive leisure (e.g., watching television) becomes all too often the option of choice and can become a problem if it is used to continually 'fill up' free time;
- no type of leisure activity is more likely to be abandoned or avoided than regular physical exercise;
- engaging in leisure with others becomes increasingly important as the involvement provides the basis for connectedness and identification within the community and social groups; and
- the older population is increasingly being targeted as a niche market to match the demand for products and services that relate specifically to leisure, well-being and quality of life (e.g., retirement villages, travel, health-related products).

Leisure has tended to be viewed as somewhat frivolous in later life (McGuire, Boyd & Tedrick, 1996). However, as we come to view the advantages of ageing as being as real as the disadvantages then what people do with their leisure time becomes highly relevant. People from all walks of life regard the leisure sphere as a basis for social and psychological identification and this could be considered a way of forestalling the onset of the traditional characteristics of old age. Although "it is ordinary leisure that consumes the most time for most people" (McGuire et al., 1996, p. 263) we need to remember this sometimes requires "discovering fresh and absorbing roles and activities to maintain wellbeing" (Blaikie, 1999, p. 61). Furthermore, the research on leisure and ageing suggests that motivations for particular leisure activities change over time based on physiological, social and psychological dimensions of individuals. However, the many benefits derived from participation in different activities may not change with a change in activity (McPherson, 1998).

LEISURE OF THE PHYSICAL KIND

One key leisure trend attracting considerable attention from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and national organisations (e.g., Heart Foundation) is the abandoning or avoiding of physical activity. The concerns are such that the WHO recently listed physical inactivity as a major health risk factor. The gradual change in functional capacity that occurs with ageing (see Figure 2) is often accelerated by being physically inactive. This can have a detrimental impact on lifestyle, independence and quality of life in the later years (Chodzko-Zajko, 2000; Shepherd, 1997). Physical inactivity causes faster wasting of muscle and bone as one ages. However, the rate of decline and change in function is complicated, for it is influenced by a variety of internal and external factors (Kirkwood 2001; McPherson, 1994). Hence, what becomes important is finding ways to minimise the impact of this naturally occurring process and exploring what role various forms of physical activity might have in this regard (McPherson, 1998; O'Brien Cousins, 1998; Shepherd, 1997).

The beliefs that older people hold about being physically active are well embedded in socially and culturally constructed norms. After analysing texts from Classical times until the present, Vertinsky (1995) demonstrated how the dominant discourse emphasized that it was not appropriate for older people, particularly women, to engage in regular physical activity. Rest was considered the virtue of old age (Kirk, 1997). To some extent these ideals still prevail and are reinforced through a diverse array of printed material designed for public

consumption and this has a strong influence on shaping the beliefs older people hold about undertaking regular exercise. However, there have been numerous voices supporting a physically active lifestyle since the fitness boom of the 1970s when regular physical activity was encouraged to counteract an increasingly sedentary lifestyle. As well, an age-resisting culture has emerged and begun to acquire significant cultural capital (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). In spite of the suggestion that being physically active influences wellbeing as much through its symbolic than its physiological impact, Sheehan (1978) stated:

When the beneficial effects of activity on the heart and circulation and indeed on all the body's systems are absent, everything measurable begins to go awry. Up go the girth of the waist and the body weight. Up go the blood pressure and the heart rate. Up go the cholesterol and the triglycerides. Up goes everything you would like to go down, and down goes everything you would like to go up. Down go the vital capacity and oxygen consumption. Down go the flexibility and efficiency, stamina and strength. Fitness fast becomes a memory. And if the body goes can the mind be far behind? The intellect must surely harden as fast as the arteries. Creativity depends on action. (p. 60)

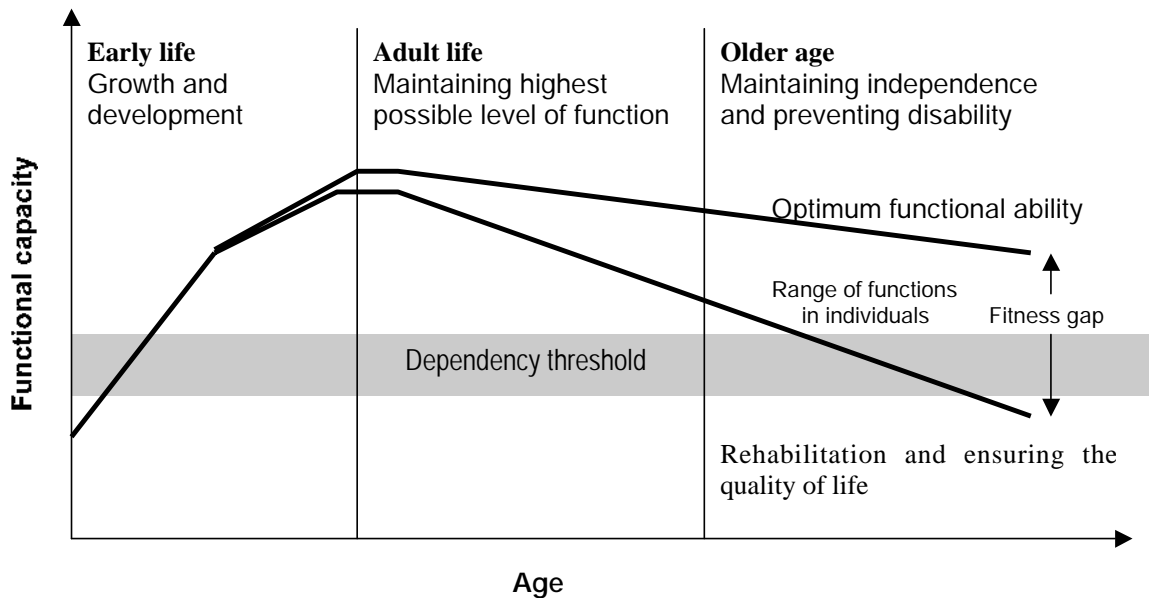


Figure 2. Functional capacity over the life course (Source: WHO 2001).

Deciding whether or not to be physically active is a lifestyle choice but for those in later life this can be difficult because of the level of infirmity attached to ageing and a perception of what the aged body should and shouldn't do. The self-reported research conducted by Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC, 2003) informs us that a high proportion of Kiwis over 65 do not engage in physically active leisure. This echoes the findings from numerous intervention studies in other countries that also report long term adherence is poor (King, 2001). However, this should not be interpreted that older people have lost the zest for living or enthusiasm for engaging in a variety of physical forms of leisure (Blaikie,

1999; Grant, 2002; O'Brien Cousins, 2000; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). The growth in Masters sport is but one example. This form of leisure offers a way of sharing in experiences with like-minded people as well as resisting the stereotypical roles and negative factors associated with older age. Studies by Grant (2001) and Dionigi (2002) both reported that participants over 70 years were very aware that the public perception was that older people were discouraged from training for and participating in sport. As one athlete interviewed by Grant said, "We're supposedly too old for this type of thing and we have to justify why we're training. It seems that playing sport seriously is something older people aren't supposed to do". The decision to participate was also complicated by a feeling of self-consciousness about one's body, something often exaggerated when others are watching *them* perform. Nevertheless, later life is replete with opportunities for growth and development but it should be remembered that those born 70 or more years ago have been bombarded with numerous and contradictory messages over time about what older people should and should not do (Grant, 2001).

Given this background it is understandable why the majority of older people consider it legitimate to withdraw from being physically active even though we now know muscles (and other body parts), irrespective of how old, respond positively to regular stress (O'Brien Cousins, 2000; Spirduso, 1994). In spite of being relatively inactive the majority of older people believe they are healthy enough (Booth, Bauman, & Owen, 2002; Faircloth, 2003). It is, therefore, unlikely we will see masses of older people become exercise 'junkies' and take to walkways, gyms, pools, sports fields or home-based exercise equipment because someone else thinks it is *good for them* (Grant, 2001). As for all meaningful leisure, the feelings and desire to participate in physically active play, whether it be structured or informal, has to come from the internal self. This helps ensure there is an opportunity for both pleasure and self-fulfilment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Kleiber, 1999). At present deliberately participating in physical activity is not deemed to satisfy this role and, therefore, is not a preferred choice for leisure.



Rest is no longer the virtue of old age. (Photograph: Susan Chapman)

RESEARCHING THE (IN)ACTIVE OLDER PERSON

With prolonged life expectancy there is now a considerable focus on studying the relationship between ageing and physical activity. This is evidenced by an increasing number of conferences being devoted solely to the subject area. As well, a variety of texts have been published on physical activity and ageing and the *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity* was introduced in 1993 to disseminate research specifically about ageing and physical activity. The majority of the research derives from a natural science or positivist social science paradigm utilizing exclusively quantitative methods. Although the resulting articles have been informative and made a significant contribution to our understanding about many quantifiable aspects of ageing and physical activity, there are short-comings as no single paradigm can capture all the subtle variations of any phenomenon (Markula, Grant & Denison, 2001).

Until recently “the questions about the role of physical activity and life were questions of quantity” (Spirduso 1994, p. 235) and, consequently, biological, psychological and sociological research has focused on quantitative measurements of older people’s physical activity patterns. However, new questions around the quality of exercise have become increasingly important. It is now accepted the study of ageing and physical activity consists not only of factual reports about and explanations of the gradual decline of the biological (and sometimes psychological) processes – but also consists of stories and explanations about attitudes, expectations, prejudices and cultural values of the society in which the individuals themselves develop and grow old. It’s also about the way people perceive their lives from the ‘inside’ out and the ‘outside’ in and the meanings they attach to their experiences of growing older. Researchers are beginning to ask more questions about such things as how physical activity contributes to mental and emotional function in the elderly and to investigate the role of physical activity in the wellbeing of the elderly. The limitations of relying solely on information about the objectified older body are captured in this modified verse by Dr Seuss (1986):

Don't worry old man for we need to know more
As you might well expect there are theories galore
So it's on to the treadmill where they test and they test
Just to measure what they treasure to compare me with the rest
The heart and the lungs work beyond belief
But it's the knees, hip and back that could do with relief
They asked me some questions about living at home
So I told them I lived in the NO exercise zone
And then waiting for the results and growing tenser each second
Fearing the fate would be worse than was reckoned
Till finally the doc emerged and said with a grin
You're in pretty good shape for the shape that you're in.

In the course of quantifying physical performance, functional capabilities and psychological characteristics of the aged, the ineffable and less tangible aspects are either suppressed or absent (Grant & O'Brien Cousins, 2001). Hence, the stories about ageing and physical activity are incomplete and the central character (i.e., the older person) is hidden from the text. Although our knowledge of active

ageing is both advanced and limited by the scientific and performance discourse (O'Brien Cousins, 1998), relying solely on knowledge of the objective body is of little help with enticing a greater proportion of the population to increase their level of active leisure (Tinning, 1997). It could be argued that "great efforts are being made to keep us alive – but little or none to encourage us to live" (Sheehan, 1989, p. 223). Some time ago Sheehan (1978) reminded us that "exercise that is work accentuates the split between body and mind, exercise that is work, drudgery or done only for the final result is worthless, but exercise that is play will give you good health and long life (p. 76).

In New Zealand SPARC currently uses the Push Play campaign to encourage more Kiwis to engage in physically active play. Push Play is a less intrusive concept than the prescriptive exercise recipes of the past – the *three times a week until it hurts* type of message. It also recognises that all people can benefit from an active lifestyle and advocates some exercise is better than none and more is better than less. This is a softer, inclusive and public-friendly message and one that recognises the different needs and circumstances of individuals. It is also more conducive to encouraging physical activity being a part of everyday life. But the message has not made any real impact in getting greater numbers of older people off the couch. However, according to SPARC (2003), many of the 65-plus age group are expressing an interest in *walking the talk*. Although it is frequently reported that engagement in physical activity decreases with age, the search for ways to make active play more appealing, accessible and a natural part of an older person's lifestyle should continue (WHO, 1997).

CONCLUSION

An increase in longevity has aroused curiosity in numerous sectors and there is a desire to know more about why and how we age. Remaining alive is one thing but living a longer life to the fullest is another. As Kirkwood (2001) says, we should focus on extending the health span while leaving the life span as it is, and to do this will require changing the ways of seeing the challenge of ageing. When discussing the living and creativity of ageing Carlsen (1996) noted how our bodies and minds and spirits are the unique expression of self and we perform the dramas of our lives in varying ways. She also argued that it is difficult to comprehend the strange mix of age until you experience it yourself. This view was shared by Sheehan (1983), when arguing the need for more creativity, more living by the older self, in his statement:

I could play any role. What is necessary is the script. When I was young I used other playwrights. I accepted the play and the role assigned me. Now it is different. This is my play. This is my script. This is no role; this is me. The years in rehearsal, the decades in preparation, all the mistakes, are now paying off. (p. 141)

One challenge for society is to find ways that encourage and support older people rewrite their script, revisit the role they choose to play and rearrange the stage on which they wish to act out their play. In order to do this we need to recognise that ageing is as dynamic as it is complex, full of ambiguities and inconsistencies and not something to be manipulated and managed solely by policies and programmes. We also need to learn a great deal more about the significance of the social and environmental determinants related to ageing and how these are integral to the

on-going struggle to foster positive ageing. There has never been “a golden age for the elderly where they are thoroughly venerated and honoured by society solely on the basis of their age” (Covey, 1988, p. 292). Hence, we have to cultivate greater levels of tolerance and accept diversity in ageing as well as find ways that celebrate the significance of this sector of the population within our community. The revolution in longevity has come so fast that we are largely stuck in the mindsets of the past (Kirkwood, 2001). An essential first step in activating an alternative, more positive perspective of ageing might be to affirm the need for an open society in which older individuals are inspired with a sense of their unique importance (WHO, 2001). In so doing, all people irrespective of age will be able to grow old with security and dignity and continue to participate in their community as citizens with full rights. This notion of humanity should underpin our intentions for it should be remembered that we are not only talking about *them* but also about *us*, the next generation of *them*.

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