

WITH RESPECT TO AGEING

A paper delivered at the launch of research findings 'Respect in an Ageing Society, Benetas and Deakin University.

2 March 2010

Hearty congratulations to Benetas and to the Deakin University research team. I read the report in one sitting. It took me quite a long time as I kept arguing with the participants and making my own observations on the research findings.

Obviously there is no time in six short minutes to address all or even the major findings. So congratulations is the word which covers my overall response.

More particularly, among the many interesting observations made in the paper is this sentence, '*No studies have investigated respect for older people within the Australian population.*'

Certainly, of course, there are many pieces of research and reports with respect to ageing. As the *Shorter Oxford* points out 'with respect to' is about 'reference to'. Older people are referred to frequently - and frequently by people with furrowed brows and given to exasperated mutterings about how society is going to cope with this epidemic of older persons.

Following the release of the Intergenerational Report by the previous federal government, there were even references in the media to a 'tsunami of the elderly'. I suspect it has become politically incorrect to use the term 'tsunami' in this cavalier way, but not yet incorrect to paint a doleful picture of a society in which one quarter of the population will, by 2050, be over 65.

The language of such reports and media articles can suggest that older people are an appendage to true society, and that the appendage is growing unhealthily large. The media report issued for today's gathering captures this in its headline, *New research shows older Australians viewed as a 'burden on society'*.

"Burden" language helps to divide the generations. Older people talk about their fear of 'becoming a burden'. Younger people, even those who love their grandparents, can express the resentment as found in the observation in this research that older people are fragile, unproductive and lacking ambition.

The transition we need to make takes us from these myth-conceptions 'with respect to ageing' to the healthier position of 'respect for older persons' or indeed respect for all.

Embedded in participant responses in this research are all of the above... burden language, estrangement between generations, confusion or disagreement about what respect is and how it is demonstrated.

That is a reason why this research is so important. As Professor Mellor has indicated, it is a beginning of what is hoped to be continuing investigation. A stated research goal is to increase understanding between the generations which make up the Australian population. I wish his team well, very well, in their quest for a grant to continue the research.

I suppose because I am Gen O, I was somewhat confronted by some of the perceptions Gens from later in the alphabet have about us. Less intellectually competent, less responsible, less ambitious, less productive...or, even worse, the literature on the subject indicates that younger persons feel sorry for older people. Unfortunately, these responses are not confined to merely the younger cohorts of the population: they have the flavour of 'mainstream' opinion about older people.

Language, preconceived ideas, an emphasis on economic drivers, media depictions of ageing, in fact ageism in all its manifestations - these are the true burdens that weigh on the cohort of older persons in Australia.

Recently, a friend of mine, a woman in her 60s, remarked that she felt she had become invisible. Now this was in the context of her futile search for a dress in shops which cater only it seems for the pre-nubile let alone the post-menopausal. There was an echo of her feeling in the comment of one participant in the research that, post-retirement, people just seem to go away.

Perceived as a mass, there is an extraordinary collection of statistical data about my friend and me and those like us. And yet there is a marked sense among older people as people, as individuals, that they are pushed to the fringes. The report suggests some of the reasons.

The one I have found most interesting, perhaps because I hadn't thought much about it, is the dispersal of families. The literature research identifies the importance of family in education about respect. When families are fragmented or dispersed for any reason the context in which respect is demonstrated is also fragmented. (Hmmm, I thought as I read that bit - I am still waiting on my Christmas present from my o/s son!)

Let me add a brief comment here about the increasing evidence COTA, and its legal partners in Seniors Rights Victoria, has of abuse of older persons most commonly inflicted by family members. I had a little argument with the Gen Y who observed that because young people had jobs and money they didn't really need older people. Unfortunately there are not many but too many members of family who decide that even the pension is too much for Mum or Dad and take it from them.

If the family is increasingly unreliable as a source of respect and care for older persons, then it means even more emphasis on the creation of age-friendly communities. You will be aware of the work being done through the WHO and illustrated by some excellent examples via local councils here in Victoria, of age-friendly cities and other communities.

It means also that social inclusion goes right up the top of the priority list. Inclusion is good for one's health. Inclusion is good for the health of all ages. Inclusion helps the nation!

I haven't said much about respect and the issues around it specifically... fortunately the research has. I would point though to the positive starting point provided by a human rights base. Victoria, along with the ACT, has a human rights charter, a very useful document from which to frame conversations about how we deal with each other. I offer that as the antidote to the opinion expressed by one younger participant that older people have to earn respect.

I would simply say that respect is the offspring of rights...regardless of race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation and age.' A person of whatever age, in whatever situation, has rights.

Of course some older people can be irritating, greedy, lazy, unthinking, judgmental... of course some younger people can be irritating, greedy, lazy, unthinking, judgmental.

Older people and younger people can also be interesting, skilled, responsive, patient, respectful.

In the first week of May this year, COTA Vic will co-host the biennial International Federation on Ageing conference. More than 700 individuals and groups have applied to give papers. Many of you might be among them. That's a lot of people talking about older persons. One of the major themes of the conference is human rights. I hope that the topic of respect is a dominant one in the discussions which will take place.

The Benetas/Deakin research gives us all another tool, a pioneering piece for Australia, on how we will live together, generation with generation. It is an important contribution to a concern that societies which achieve an extension of life also achieve an extension of skills for living.

Janet Wood
President
COTA Vic.