

Prepared for an ageing society?

Malaysians need to consider the impact of an ageing population well before we become one, a gerontologist tells
Aneeta Sundararaj

A WOMAN is about to be discharged from the hospital and keen to return home. Unfortunately, she needs prolonged treatment and care. Her children live overseas and she has very few options. A relative comes forward and agrees to take her in and promises that she's not a burden at all.

Professor Helen Bartlett, an expert on gerontology or the study of ageing in a society, says that there are a few stereotypes in the story above. And Bartlett doesn't like stereotypes. Indeed, she refuses to share her age in case people develop stereotypes and define her by her experiences rather than feature her as a researcher.

Originally from the UK, Bartlett now calls Australia home. She has been with Monash University for 6½ years and in Malaysia, for the last two. She is the Pro Vice Chancellor and president (Malaysia) of Monash University.

A graduate of the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, Bartlett says that there's no particular factor that pointed her towards gerontology as a focus for her research. The only clue is when she

says: "My grandparents died before they had an influence on my life. I became interested in their roles in families."

Furthermore, she spent a long time interviewing older people about their lives and hearing about how their social interactions had diminished, along with opportunities for learning and engaging in interesting activities. She says: "(My eyes were really opened to the consequences of population ageing and the limited care options available to older people and their families."

In her book, *Nursing Homes for Elderly People. Questions of Quality and Policy*, Bartlett writes about two residents of nursing home. One said that there was nothing to do — nothing interested this resident and no one was interested in this resident either. On the other hand, there was another who 'never considered her days boring'. She always had something to do, be it letter-writing or reading the newspapers.

Going back to the example in the opening paragraph, Bartlett says: "Stereotypes like 'take her in' takes away from an older person the notion that he or she can be in control of his own life. Also, there's this thought that she may

be an added 'burden' to the family.

"Old people are considered senile, confused and cantankerous, and have nothing to contribute to society; they're relevant to the past."

Precisely how can such a person continue to contribute to society? Bartlett explains: "We found that school children benefitted from grandparents coming to read to them. Older people have infinite patience. Their unconditional love and determination to reach out to children helps to build up a huge trust between the grandchild and grandparent."

This "learning" is a two-way process because the children learn new things as well. For example, Bartlett adds: "Children will learn that human beings come in all shapes and sizes. They can help the older generation with the internet and skype, which builds their confidence. As a schoolgirl, I engaged with older citizens and remember enjoying hearing the life stories of an older couple I visited after school. As I had had very little engagement with my own grandparents, this was a memorable intergenerational

experience for both me and them."

Bartlett gives another example: "My first professor at university was a formidable character, approaching retirement age but showing no signs of slowing down. He patiently taught me how to write my first article. What made his mentoring special was the selfless giving and encouragement (for me) to master research and writing skills. A surprise for me was when I took up rowing lessons from one of my students. Having never sat in a rowing boat in my life, I was totally reliant on her, who displayed incredible understanding about adult learning, even when I was a little slow on the uptake."

All this leads to the main problem she has identified: By 2040, it's estimated that 12 per cent of the Malaysian population will be 65 or more. This means that we'll become an ageing society. The question is simple: Are we prepared for our soon-to-be ageing society?

Having researched similar situations in the UK and Australia, Bartlett cautions: "In the beginning, such care facilities mushroom and as demand grows, so do the number of places that offer such facilities. Some of them are by well-meaning individuals

and entrepreneurs." But, the problems start when the potential for abuse increase as well. "How are we going to respond to the needs of these people? Are there enough nursing homes? What is the quality of care in these nursing homes? Is there a way to rate the quality of care offered in these nursing homes? Are there regulatory mechanisms in place? Do we have people with the necessary expertise to look after older people?"

In an ideal world, we should explore the option of community care. The reality, however, is that right now, the NGO and churches are the only ones really looking into this area of care. To reinforce her message, Bartlett says: "Malaysia needs to ask itself how the ageing population is going to impact the country. There should be a framework in place to help people navigate this issue. We can't just leave it to market forces."

To create such a framework, Bartlett suggests that all the stakeholders refer to a document by the World Health Organisation on Active Ageing (The World Health Organisation's Active Ageing Framework). "Many countries are using it as a guide to formulate their own plans," she says.

Ultimately, the message is simple: This issue cannot be left in the hands of governments to sort out alone. There needs to be discourse among various parties well before we reach 2040.



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