

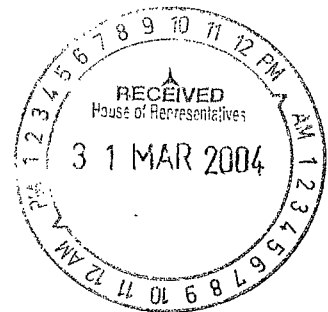
Submission to House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Ageing

The Wellbeing of Older Men

Richard Morrison

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Abstract:

Older men as a group have unique characteristics. They are often in a position to contribute significantly to their communities. At the same time however, they are frequently neglected in social policy, under-represented among service recipients and over represented in a number of adverse health and wellbeing domains. This paper draws on the experience of the Wellbeing of Older Men in the Hunter Project (National Suicide Prevention Strategy – auspiced by Hunter Retirement Living/Uniting Care) to argue for the desirability of a nationally co-ordinated approach to issues facing older men. National co-ordination would maximise the benefit of the good work being done in many places around the country by individuals and organisations working with and for older men.

Questions of research priorities, policy development and funding strategies need to be addressed nationally. Strategic approaches employed to good effect by the Wellbeing Project include; recognising the social determinants of health, establishing inter-sectorial collaborations, and building strengths based approaches which maximise community capacity. Some programs illustrating these principles include, men's health sessions, retirement preparation workshops, OM:NI groups, and men's sheds.

This submission recognises that older men also face other issues outside the scope of the Wellbeing Project which might be included in a national strategy.

Introduction

Older Men

Older men share many characteristics which distinguish them from other sectors of the Australian population. Their identity and culture have been shaped in the unique and highly gendered experiences of war and post war Australia. Individuality, independence and achievement are among the qualities prized by these men. Now in that ill-defined period of life referred to as 'old age', these men bring unique and diverse experiences and perspectives to contemporary Australian society.

Older men present two challenges to Australian society. On the one hand, we want and need to acknowledge and draw upon the resource older men represent in their communities. On the other hand, we must also find appropriate ways to meet the complex needs of this unique group.

In noting these two challenges it must be said that they are not entirely separate challenges. It is the conviction of many older men and those working with them, that part of the response to each challenge lies in the other. One way we can develop appropriate ways to meet the needs of older men is precisely in utilising the wisdom and experience of older men.

Another note at this point flows from the observation that the generation of men which experienced war, will increasingly be replaced by a cohort which had a different experience and which will consequently bring different challenges.

Social Contribution of Older Men

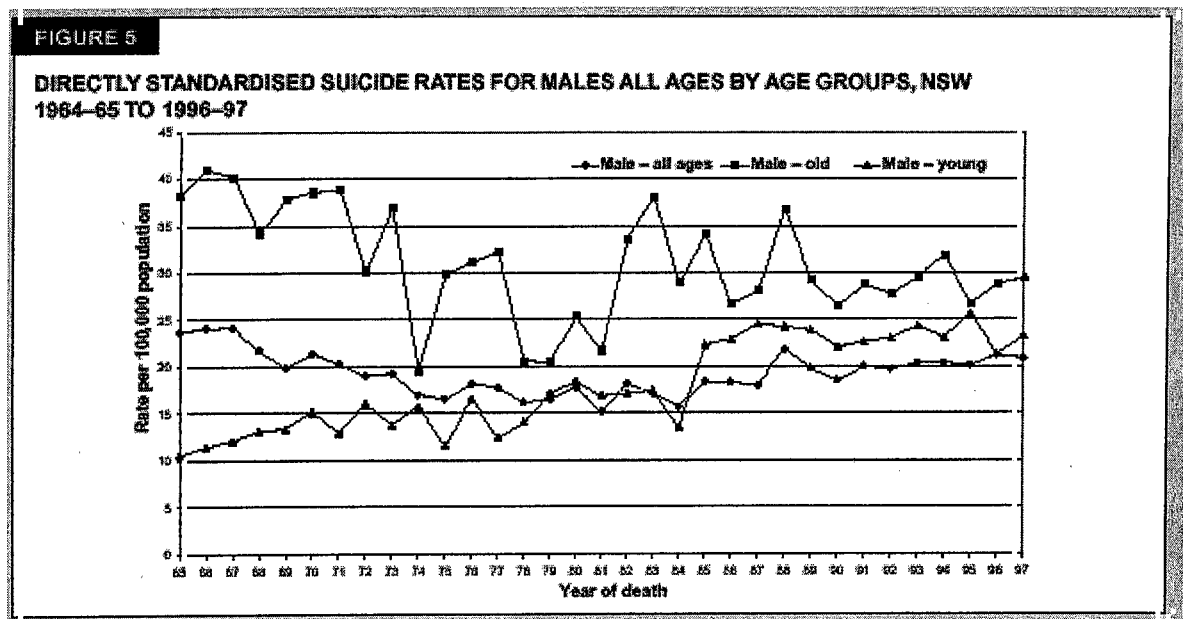
While it is not in the scope of this submission to make a comprehensive assessment of the social contribution of older men it should be noted that men contribute to the community in paid, un-paid and volunteer capacities (Macdonald, John J., Brown Anthony & Buchanan, John 2001:7ff).

Another significant way in which men contribute to their communities is through formal and informal mentoring (Law 1990:17ff). The nature and extent of mentoring activity by and among older men in Australia however, is yet to be fully explored.

Areas of Concern

Health and Wellbeing

Suicide remains a risk for older men. Figures below from NSW indicate some reduction in the suicide rate for older men over the last 40 years however their risk rate is still significantly higher than for other males.



<http://www.asnsw.health.nsw.gov.au/public-health/phb/mar01html/figure5march01.gif>

Depression in our society has received necessary attention in recent years and the recent initiatives of the Department of Health & Ageing (including the Challenge Depression program) have benefited many older men. Among older men we believe that there is also a significant amount of undiagnosed and poorly treated depression.

Loss and grief represents another significant challenge for older men. Multiple losses are attached to the ageing process many of which have yet to

receive a distinctively male analysis. We suspect that men grieve differently to women and that the grief of a widower probably deserves a different set of responses to that of women. Other losses frequently faced by men in later life include, loss of status, loss of work related identity, loss of economic reward for labour, loss of companionship in the workplace, loss of friends and peers to relocation and/or death, loss of body image and function, loss of freedom, loss of mobility, loss of home, loss of cognitive function and the anticipation of loss of life. Older men, we believe, will more readily face such losses with courage and ingenuity when they receive appropriate support.

Social isolation not only reduces the quality of life for older men but also contributes to poor outcomes in other areas, especially health. It is an integral part in the matrix of older men's wellbeing,

“present findings suggest that social isolation may also influence the experience of depression. Age-related losses such as loss of professional identity, physical mobility, and the inevitable loss of family and friends can affect a person's ability to maintain relationships and independence, which in turn may lead to a higher incidence of depressive symptoms.”

Alpass, Fiona M; Neville, S. 2003, *Loneliness, health and depression in older males*, Aging & Mental Health. Vol 7, no. 3, pp. 212-216.

Community Attitudes

Community attitudes also significantly affect the social, health and quality of life outcomes for older men. The combined effects of sexist and ageist bias are commonly felt by older men. The excellent report into older men's wellbeing, *Keeping the Balance*, prepared for the NSW Committee for Ageing, has documented some aspects of this phenomenon.

Another dimension of community attitudes towards older men is the danger of them becoming invisible. Older men frequently report that after retirement they felt as though nobody paid them any attention. The strong ethic among this age group of self-sufficiency (not wanting to bother anyone) may also constitute part of the reason that older men are underrepresented among clients of various community based services.

Change is unavoidable in the ageing process and in society. Amidst such change, individuals and communities must work to enhance a sense of the value of older men, break down negative stereotypes and social patterns and develop appropriate strategies and services for older men. The role of a national strategy would be to facilitate and enhance responses to these challenges.

Strategies for Responses

The Wellbeing of Older Men in the Hunter Project is committed to a number of key strategies which we believe constitute an essential part of any response to issues facing older men.

Social Determinants of Health

Individuals live in societies which may contribute to, or detract from, their health. When Virchow looked at the typhus epidemics in Germany in 1849. He noticed a connection between epidemics and crowded housing, poor crops, and malnutrition. Social factors contribute significantly to health.

Inter-sectorial Collaborations

The Wellbeing Project both draws upon and exemplifies such partnerships. The Project is auspiced by Hunter Retirement Living/Uniting Care and has developed a formal memorandum of understanding with both the University of Newcastle and Hunter Area Health Service. This three way partnership has positioned the project for a significant contribution to the wellbeing of older men.

Another example of collaboration is the proposed involvement of the registered club movement in the drawing together of a wide variety of health and welfare agencies for a forum on the wellbeing of older men. In this case the club involvement will provide both neutral meeting point and community endorsement of the process.

Strengths Based Approaches

The conviction that older men are the greatest resource of the project lies at the heart of our program. Individual older men demonstrate great resilience and ingenuity in dealing with the issues they face. Bringing them together to strengthen and encourage one another constitutes much of what we do.

Community Capacity Building

The communities in which older men live also contribute significantly to their welfare. Building this capacity is the stated objective of the Wellbeing of Older Men Project. The breadth of this capacity is yet to be fully charted but it is the conviction of the project that it must be nurtured both within and beyond the recognised health and welfare services. Registered clubs, service organisations, churches, sporting bodies, corporate citizens, passionate individuals, government at all levels all contribute to the rich capacity of communities.

Pilot Programs and Initiatives

The Wellbeing of Older Men Project is in the process of developing and/or trailing a number of programs which flow out of our understanding of the issues and strategies.

Men's Health Sessions

The success of men's health nights and health sessions has been written up elsewhere, (Verrinder, Adrian & Denner, Bernard 2000:81-86). Such health sessions bring medical practitioners and men together in culturally appropriate ways to hear about men's health issues. With the encouragement of the local Department of Veterans Affairs, Community Advisor, a number of ex-services organisations are now looking at ways of duplicating our trial program across the Hunter. The project will provide a comprehensive manual to assist community organisations with this process.

Retirement Preparation Workshops

One piece of feedback our project has often heard is, "No one ever told me retirement was going to be like this." On that basis we are committed to developing a retirement preparation workshop which we will then train older men to present in the workplace. Initial indications of interest in the idea have been very warm, especially from large employers.

OM:NI groups

Older Men: New Ideas (OM:NI) groups are an initiative of the Council of the Ageing – NSW. They bring together men to share their stories and reflect on their lives in a supportive 'men only' context. These groups provide a special depth of relationship as men share and connect with others in the process.

Men's Sheds

While OM:NI represents an opportunity for "talking", community sheds provide opportunities for older men to "build, do and fix" and for a different sort of social connection. Such sheds are multiplying across Australia as changing patterns of urban development reduce opportunities to have a shed of one's own. The psychology of sheds in Australia has received considerable popular attention and many older men testify to their desire to "have a quiet place to go".

Desirability of Nationally Co-ordinated Initiatives for Older Men

The work of the Wellbeing of Older Men in the Hunter Project is just one example of a number of initiatives in meeting the social, emotional and health needs of older men. It is the impression of the project that such initiatives are not well co-ordinated and that great efficiencies could be derived from a national strategy to address the issues facing older men. Areas which may be addressed in such a strategy would include setting research priorities, facilitating information flows, minimising duplication (eg. OH&S procedures for men's sheds could be

shared where appropriate), enhancing existing initiatives, addressing issues of equity and advocating for recognition of issues facing older men.

The Wellbeing of Older Men in the Hunter Project enjoys a privileged opportunity to work with older men on a range of issues which are important to them. The project is conscious that not all regions have the resources we have in the Hunter and that other regions and other men will certainly want to add different perspectives to those expressed here.

Thankyou for the opportunity to make this presentation today and for your concern for, and commitment to, sustainable ageing in Australia.

Richard Morrison

Project Co-ordinator

Wellbeing of Older Men in the Hunter Project.

Hunter Retirement Living/Uniting Care

30 Barber Street

Mayfield NSW 2304

Ph: 02 4967 5172

Fax: 02 4967 5169

Email: richard.morrison@hunterretirement.com.au

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