

Active ageing makes the difference

Alexandre Kalache¹

"Active ageing is the process of optimizing opportunities for physical, social and mental well-being throughout the life course in order to extend healthy life expectancy."

Ministry of Health, Canada.

Close to three decades have been added to life expectancy at birth worldwide since the turn of the century. There are currently about 580 million people in the world aged 60 years and over, and this figure is expected to rise to over 1000 million within the next 20 years — a 75% increase in that age group compared to a less than 50% increase in the world's population as a whole. By 2020 approximately 70% of the elderly population will be living in developing countries. These changes represent an unprecedented demographic revolution and require the immediate attention of policy-makers worldwide. Compared with the speed at which populations in the developing world are ageing at present, the process in industrialized countries was much slower. It took 115 years in France for the proportion of older persons to rise from 7% to 14%, whereas in countries such as China, Brazil and Thailand, the same doubling will occur in the next 20 years. Concurrently, today's oldest populations will age further, the very old (aged 75 and over) being the population subgroup that will increase the most in virtually all industrialized countries.

What is an extraordinary achievement for this century will be one of the great challenges for the next: ensuring the quality of life of an unprecedentedly large elderly population. Central to this challenge is health, which is seen in rich and poor societies alike as the most valuable asset for a good quality of life, particularly in one's later years.

For individuals to contribute to society, good health is a key facilitator. However, good health often reflects the degree of support one receives from society. It is

therefore crucial to ensure that older persons have every opportunity to remain active. Just as health sustains activity, it is an active life that stands the best chance of being a healthy one.

As stated in the WHO Brasilia Declaration on Ageing (1996), healthy older persons are a resource for their families, their communities and the economy. The more active they are, the more they can contribute to society. Thus countries should recognize healthy ageing as a key factor for their development agenda, and should see their ageing populations not as a problem but as a potential solution to problems. Too often discussed merely in terms of their unmet needs, elderly populations should be seen first and foremost as a resource to be used.

Activities related to the "active ageing" theme of this year's World Health Day (7 April) are aimed particularly at correcting false assumptions and myths such as the following.

- "Most older people live in developed countries." In reality, 355 million of the world's 580 million older persons live in developing countries.
- "Older people are all the same." In reality, the longer people live, the more diverse the elderly population becomes.
- "Men and women age in the same way." In reality there are very significant differences, though it is only recently that research has started to focus on ageing from a gender perspective.
- "Older people are frail." In reality the vast majority of older people remain physically fit well into later life.
- "Older persons have nothing to contribute." In reality the net contribution of older persons to their families and communities is vast, albeit difficult to quantify since much of it is unremunerated.
- "Older people are an economic burden." In reality, this burden is caused to a large extent by older people being excluded from paid work, despite their willingness and ability to continue.

To help draw attention to the challenges and opportunities population ageing brings, the United Nations has designated 1999 the International Year of Older Persons. This sets the stage for WHO to promote active ageing policies and programmes worldwide, working with government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, professional associations, academic institutions and the media to provide the initiative for organizing events and activities. These in their turn will help to form a global network of collaboration in defining policies and models of good practice.

The world's growing elderly population is confronting decision-makers more and more with the need to make choices that have far-reaching implications for society as a whole. Health systems, social services and employment policies are already being reshaped to fit the current and emerging demographic reality. Next will be education, leisure activities and the media, and eventually all aspects of society will be affected.

All too often decisions are being taken in the spirit of coping with the inconvenience change brings, rather than using the advantages and potential benefits that change also brings. International agencies should now be bringing together civil society in a positive and orchestrated response to ageing. Their success will depend on commitment and resources for strengthening the knowledge base through research, training and policy development. WHO's responsibility is to ensure that active ageing becomes one of the great health achievements of the 21st century. ■

¹ Group Leader, Ageing and Health Programme, World Health Organization, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland (tel: +41 22 791 34 05; fax: +41 22 791 48 39; e-mail: activeageing@who.ch).