



**Australian Government**

---

**Office of the Aged Care Commissioner**

Level 4, 12-20 Flinders Lane, MELBOURNE VIC 3000

Locked Bag 3, Collins Street East VIC 8003

Tel: 1800 500 294, (03) 9665 8033, Fax: (03) 9663 7369

**Monash Institute for Regional Studies**

**First Friday Seminar Series  
September 4, 2009**

**Ageing and the Regions**

**Rhonda Parker  
Aged Care Commissioner**

## **Wish list for the Regions in an Ageing Demographic.**

Thank you for the invitation to be here today, and thank you for your interest in the region and the challenges and opportunities to be found as the population ages.

The average life expectancy increased as much in the last 100 years as it did in the previous 5,000 years. While sophisticated medical treatments played a role in that, advancements in public health systems such as sanitation and infection control were the really significant contributors.

I believe the increase in average life expectancy was one of the greatest achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why is it then that, rather than celebrate the achievement, so often from a program or policy point of view we act as if we've created a Frankenstein.

Do we fundamentally think we can't deal with the challenge? Now, why would we think that? Effective public policy created the increase in the quantity of life years. Why couldn't effective public policy now find ways to ensure quality in those extra years?

A second, more concerning scenario is that we fundamentally don't prioritise quality for our elders. Are we ageist? Do we think children and adolescents and growing families and working adults should be supported by effective government systems, but older people, well, do they qualify for the same priority?

We can't see into the future, but we can learn from the past. In the 1950's there was much talk about how our systems would cope with all these new babies. How could we afford schools for them all? Universities? Yet we know that the population bubble we know as the boomers drove economic activity, change and the solutions to the challenges their numbers presented. Fifty years ago we could not have imagined what would be achieved. In a similar way, I believe there is good reason for us to be optimistic. However, that optimism is conditional – we will have to be diligent and resourceful in our pursuit of effective responses.

What is my wish list for the regions in Australia as we continue to age as a population? The list is long and I don't have time to be exhaustive, but the following items appear early on my list.

1. The regions will have access to the same opportunities and quality indicators as those in urban areas.
2. Older people will have access to the same opportunities for quality of life as all other sectors of the population.
3. Research has established three key indicators of quality in later life – they are engagement, low disease risk, and high physical and mental function. My wish is that those responsible for policy and programs will use these three indicators as a litmus test for all they do in the next 20 years.
4. We're living in a space never experienced before - the world's population has never been 'old' before. Older people need quality, contemporary information

about ageing, about what it is and more importantly what it is not. The 're-education' about age will also apply to employers and employees.

5. The regions will work out what their 'market advantage' is in an ageing demographic and proactively seek to reap the benefits of that.
6. By 2025 we will look out across this 'space' and be surprised and pleased by what we have managed to achieve.

My list, of course, is much longer. If we are going to achieve these and other objectives, we will need to know how to best do that. Enter the role of research.

As I have mentioned, as a society, there is no template for where we are going in terms of a population that is ageing as quickly as ours. If we think we know the answers I'd suggest we are not being honest with ourselves. This is a new situation with a new set of challenges. We will need to establish a good set of evidence on which we can base decisions. Then we'll have to act.

To achieve my wish list, we will need research to inform our decisions. We have learnt much about ageing well from research in the last 15 years, but there is much we don't know, particularly in specific situations such as regional life.

In that context, it gives me pleasure to introduce two researchers from the Monash Centre for Regional Studies, Professor Helen Bartlett and Ms Susan Whyte. Helen and Susan are responding to the challenge to establish a body of knowledge to inform our decisions as we respond to the ageing of the population. Their particular interest is focussed on the regions.