



Us as we age – responding to the demographic bounty

We are very grateful to the Minister of State for Older People, Ms Máire Hctor, for launching this teaching pack on 13 September 2007.

The most remarkable, and most under-valued, achievement of the 20th century is the increase in longevity of our populations. Despite the individual good news that this means for each of us, as well as the benefits to society at many levels, it is all too common that popular perception, whether through the media or politics, have failed to develop a balanced perspective on the nature of this change. Rather than identifying personally with this life-extension, or recognizing its many benefits, it is sadly too common to hear of negative phrases such as ‘demographic timebomb’, a process identified by the prominent ageing scientist, Prof Alan Walker, as ‘the myth of the burden of ageing’.

Fortunately, Ireland has embarked on developments to promote a better framework for older people – us as we age - and in the health arena, important beginnings have been made in promoting specialist approaches to healthcare for older people, which have been of proven effectiveness – for example, both acute geriatric medicine, and stroke unit care (both practiced at the Adelaide and Meath Hospital) can reduce death and disability by 25%, and specialist pathways for falls can reduce unnecessary hospitalization and further falls for older people.

The development of a national strategy for older people will be a major development for the Irish state, and allow for a measured reflection on the best forward planning so as to maximize the benefits of the demographic bounty. While an important start has been made in attuning Irish health services to the needs of older people, a significant expansion in the numbers of specialist nurses, doctors and therapists will also be required to meet the needs of older people.

A key to the further development is the provision of gerontological education to healthcare workers in their undergraduate training and Continuing Professional Development. This has been recognized as a high priority by the United Nations in the Second Declaration on Ageing, which recognizes training in skills of care for older people as a critical success factor for all healthcare professionals, whether in primary or secondary care, as vital to developing a healthcare system which meets the more complex needs of this heterogeneous group.

The Adelaide and Meath Hospital has been an Irish pioneer in this regard, with the development of the first formal series of tutorials and training packs (AgePages) for junior medical students in 1994.

Adhering to the biopsychosocial model of care (talk of medical and social models of care is an unwelcome relic of the 1960’s), the teaching pack is intended as a primer for what will be a need for life-long development and learning for healthcare professionals. One innovative approach is the use of the humanities as a way of illustrating the narrative of later life, as well as the impact of illness. The reading list consists preliminary of novels and true life accounts, which remind students of the perspective of older people, as well as the richness of context of later life.

The pack contains:

- 1 Ageing, society and health
- 2 Assessment of function
- 3 Stroke Part 1
- 4 Stroke Part 2
- 5 Stroke Assessment Tools
- 6 Dementia and Delirium
- 7 Parkinsonism
- 8 Continence Failure
- 9 Falls and Bone Health 1
- 10 Falls and Bone Health 2
- 11 Mental Health and Ageing 1
- 12 Mental Health and Ageing 2
- 13 Reading List

The launch of this 2007/2008 edition of the AgePages coincides with the development of Aois agus Eolas, the Centre for Ageing, Neuroscience and the Humanities. We are grateful to the many staff who have contributed to the renewal of the AgePages over the years, as well as to the whole multi-disciplinary team who have supported the teaching of medical students over the last thirteen years. In this year’s edition, we thank especially Drs Máiréad Bartley, Nuala Caffrey, Marie-Therese Lonergan, Nicky Quinlan, as well as Dr Siobhán Ní Bhriain of Late Life Psychiatry.