

Older People Go Missing at the Summit

You wouldn't know that Australia was an ageing society from reading the *Initial Report* of the 2020 Summit. There is one explicit reference to 'the aged' - as being people who may require carers - and one to 'retired people' - as a source of free labour as mentors in the workplace. There are lots of references to children and families. That's good, children and families *are* important. But, so are older people and we are going to have a lot more of them!

The report on *A Long Term National Health Strategy* refers to Australians 'at all stages of life' but all of the examples it refers to are children and people of working age.

The discussion of *Strengthening Communities* similarly talks about issues that are equally relevant to all ages - such as 'housing affordability' and 'increased funding for community services provision and community infrastructure' but it only specifies children and disabled *young* people among the beneficiaries of such services.

Generation X has hi-jacked the Summit! Or maybe the problem is that 'My Generation' has not really moved beyond 'I hope I die before I get old' (The Who) and still identifies itself with youth as opposed to the reality that that generation are now in their 50's and 60's.

Does this matter?

It does if it really means that we are planning for 2020 on the basis of denial. Or that we are only in the market for good ideas if they relate to children and young people. It matters if we fail to value older people, not only in terms of the contribution they have made to getting us to where we are today but also for the contribution they still have to make. It matters if this lack of regard leads us to deny the services older people need the resources required to make them excellent.

The ideas put forward at the Summit in the *Health Strategy* stream are good ideas. Focussing on a preventative health strategy though should include a focus on older people's specific needs. Older people benefit just as much from exercise and healthy eating as younger people - and there are going to be more of them. Research into the complex interconnected conditions that affect older people is needed and the use of technology to enhance people's independence and well-being is relevant at all ages. If any area cries out for straightening out convoluted arrangements between the Commonwealth and the States it's health and aged care and the concept of a portable, electronic health record has a respectable pedigree.

I don't have an argument with the ideas the Summit did put up, as long as they are not treated as an exhaustive list, but the denial of the reality of an ageing population and the failure to value older people is a real concern. It encourages the view that older people are not important, that they have had their time and that we should invest as little as possible on caring for them. I know that this is not the view of many who attended the Summit, including some of Australia's key thinkers on ageing and aged care but it is the view that made it into the *Initial Report* and that's a problem.

Let's hope this can be addressed in the fuller report of proceedings due next month. I know that these points were made during the Summit's deliberations last weekend. They deserve to be not just reported but highlighted as central to the reality of Australia's population and to the resourcing priorities of the Government.