

The ageing answer is to just go gracefully with the flow

By Ruth Ostrow

LAST week's ABS findings reported that during the next few decades people over 50 will outnumber teenagers three-to-one, jumping to 50 per cent of the population.

Meanwhile, there are apparently 600 million people on the planet today aged 60 and over following the baby-boomer explosion, meaning there will be 1.2 billion senior citizens within 20 years. The consequences of having such a large ageing population are not to be scoffed at.

One man believes the situation is so critical he is prepared to go to great lengths to address the issue in the hope of finding solutions to the enormous financial and emotional drain the aged population will probably cause.

High-profile Melbourne criminal lawyer John Weller has worked for the past six years with his son Noah, a health researcher, in putting together what will be the second International Conference on Healthy Ageing and Longevity, to be held in Brisbane in March.

The first such conference was held in Sydney last year – which attracted 60 of the world's leading researchers and health clinicians, from the UN and World Health Organisation through to Patch Adams (who developed the concept of clown doctors using laughter as medicine), and including the renowned Canadian scientist Dr David Suzuki, who stressed that for healthy ageing to be possible a healthy environment is essential.

John and his team want us as a society to accept rather than deny the ageing process. To aim for health and happiness in our latter years rather than put resources into a losing battle of staying forever young. He also wants society to explore preventative rather than only curative medicine.

"I came from a very close family and like a lot of baby boomers spent a great part of the late '80s and '90s watching my parents progressively suffering from poor health, attending many different doctors, nursing homes, hospitals and the debilitating effect this had on them," Weller says.

"I was upset because I could see that a healthier lifestyle and preventative measures would have really helped my parents and their generation."

He says that he was also exposed to the growing interest in what was then seen as alternative therapies.

"Through my legal career I witnessed the large gulf that existed between the medical practitioners and natural and complementary practitioners.

"The hospitalisation of my parents occurred at a time when there was a growing strain on the hospital system with overcrowding, shortage of beds and obviously overworked and exhausted nurses and doctors. This is shaping up to be the case in the coming decades as more people will be suffering the effects of old age than may be available to look after them."

On the death of both parents John and son Noah started to work together to investigate what was happening in various parts of the world in terms of sharing of knowledge about preventative and healthy ageing practices.

"We found the majority of conferences around the world focused on anti-ageing and associated expensive products with an ever-increasing emphasis on the way people looked – promoting plastic surgeries and products like botox, which have caused concern in the scientific community as to possible long-term effects.

"Many of the world's leading researchers were disenchanted with the anti-ageing movement and when they realised the Weller family was putting together an annual conference that would choose its speakers without links to any form of sponsorship, or agenda to promote specific products, it seemed to infuse the national and international community with a breath of fresh air," he says.

Weller, who is digging deep into his own pocket to help fund the annual conference for 10 years or until it is self-sufficient, says the aim is to emphasise the need for evidence-based knowledge from whatever source – western scientific, natural and complementary, or ancient wisdom to promote longevity.

He also wants to bring together policy makers, doctors, nurses, social workers, researchers, and government officials to put forward their ideas so that preventative medicine and healthy ageing programs can be routinely introduced into clinical practice.

And he wants to attract the general public to participate in educating themselves on how to grow old gracefully.

As a tribute to its success, Weller says that at the conclusion of the first conference a non-profit charitable entity called The International Research Centre for Healthy Ageing and Longevity was launched with 18 world scientists and researchers becoming members and pledging voluntary support. At this year's conference many speakers are offering their services without charge – including myself. I will be giving a lecture on sexuality and ageing, focusing on the importance of staying juicy as part of good health.

Weller says: "Unlike our stoic parents and grandparents, we have been nourished and nurtured post-World War II and have a real disposition to look after ourselves. We want to end our days frequenting health spas, not follow our parents into hospitals and nursing homes. Let's explore the possibilities."

As the Aboriginal healers say: "Nobody owns health; it belongs to us all."

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