

1 COLLEGE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF JAPAN

Monthly General Meeting – 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2024

Hon Dr Kay Patterson AO

Former Australian Senator and Former Age Discrimination Commissioner

(check against delivery)

Konnichiwa and greetings from Australia.

I was delighted to be asked by one of your members, a dear friend of mine of 61 years, Keiko Kimura – we met in Mexico when we were guests of the Girl Scouts of America at an international event for 25 girls and 2 leaders from 9 countries. I know Keiko has warned the organisers that I speak quickly with an Australian accent – I will try my hardest to speak slowly and clearly! Keiko please stop me if I break the speed limit!!!

30 minutes is too little time to cover the issues of a “Spotlight on Ageing in Australia” so it will be more of a snapshot than a spotlight.

Before looking at ageing we need to compare quickly Japan and Australia:

- Japan is approximately 5% of the land size of Australia.
- Japan is a country of islands and Australia is basically one large island.
- The population of Japan is 123m and Australia 27m.
- Life expectancy for a child born in 2022 in Japan is 85 years and in Australia 83 – Japan comes in 1<sup>st</sup> in the world and Australia in 10<sup>th</sup> place

- Median age in Japan is 48.6 years and in Australia it is 38.5 years.
- Percentage of permanent residents born overseas is 30% in Australian and 2.2% Japan, both countries have additional long-term residents on working and student visas etc.

Eighty five percent of our Australian population live in major cities located mainly on the east and south east coast of the continent. The distribution of the population – especially in rural and remote areas – poses significant challenges in providing government services such as health, education and aged care.

When I was born in 1944 the population of Australia was 7.3m and comprised mainly of immigrants from the British Isles and of course the much smaller population of indigenous Australian who were not formally included in the census until 1971. After the WWII there were waves of immigrants from different countries and currently 1/3 of our population was born overseas and represent over 270 ethnic groups. The waves of migration mean that there are different age profiles amongst groups of overseas born permanent residents – this is another factor which needs to be considered in policy affecting older Australians.

Australia comprises 6 states and two territories. In 1901 Australia became a Federation when the six British colonies united to form the Commonwealth of Australia. There are three levels of Government Federal, State and Local Council. All have different responsibilities and there are some shared responsibilities and sometimes this poses challenges for example in the areas of health.

Policies affecting older Australians have evolved since Federation in 1901. In 1908 the National Parliament passed the Invalid and Old-Age Pensions Act (only 4% of the population were over 65 – life expectancy was on average 57 – there was an income and assets test, they had to have been residents for 25 years and be “of good character” – e.g. those who had deserted their wives and families in the previous 5 years were not eligible.

The age pension has changed significantly since then – the full age pension for a single person is approximately AUD 28,516 (JPY2,778,032) and is means and asset tested (the family home is excluded) and the eligibility age has been raised gradually from 60 for women and 65 for men to 67 for both men and women.

In 1992 superannuation was made compulsory in Australia – employer contributions of 3% of salary were compulsory and this has increased to 11%. There are also tax incentives for individuals to make contributions. Over time superannuation is reducing dependence on the Government age pension as our population ages. However, the reduction in dependency has not been as significant as had been expected.<sup>1</sup>

People on an age pension who own their own home and have a small income from assets can live reasonably comfortably. Home ownership amongst post war “Baby Boomers” has been relatively high but the number of people owning their own home is decreasing and rental stress and homelessness is increasing including amongst older Australians.<sup>2</sup>

Over time older people have benefitted from a number of general policies and others designed especially for them.

Amongst the general policies which have been of benefit to older people are, for example:

Health<sup>3</sup>– Since 1984 after the introduction of a health system called Medicare -which is available to Australian and New Zealand citizens and permanent residents – the cost of public hospital services, services provided by a general practitioner and some other health services are covered partly or in whole government. The system is considered one of the best in the world. It still has its limitations and is usually first rate for emergencies such as stroke, heart attacks and emergency surgery but those without private health insurance, which includes many low income people, may involve long waiting times for elective surgery such as a hip or knee replacement

There is also a Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme – there are over 5,200 medicines on this scheme and it is available to citizens and permanent residents. Aged pensioners and those on other social benefits and on low incomes pay a lower price called a Concessional fee. There is a safety net for both groups if they reach a certain number of scripts in a calendar year – it still amazes some people when they discover if they are not on a pension or other benefit the price per script is:

Concessional fee which is \$7.70 (¥749) and for the Non-concessional fee A\$31.60 (¥3078) and even less if they have reached the safety net – for a drug which may cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

There are other health initiatives which are a shared responsibility between the Federal Government, state governments and local government – those particularly relevant to older Australians for e.g. are the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program, funding of palliative care and national mental health.

Aged Care is the responsibility of the Federal Government<sup>4</sup> as our population ages it has become a major policy area. We recently had a Royal Commission into Aged Care which made a raft of recommendations and called for a people-centric aged care system. Over time those entering aged care have become much older, frailer and in poorer health and the current funding arrangements (funded by government and those able to pay) are insufficient and a significant number of providers are in difficult financial circumstances. In addition, more and more older Australians want to age at home and there have been increasing demands for the government provided (and partly paid for by those who have means) to have aged care delivered in the home. There are currently significant reforms being introduced in response to the Aged Care Royal Commission. One of the most disturbing findings of the Commission was that “alleged incidents of unlawful sexual contact in 2018-19 were as high as 48 a week”. The Government has begun to compel providers to report serious incidents, including sexual abuse.

There is a Quality and Safety Aged Care Commission and Advisory Council overseeing standards in aged care.<sup>5</sup>

There is also an income and assets tested Carer Payment for a person giving constant care to someone including caring for an adult who is aged and frail.<sup>6</sup>

There is also legislation to protect individuals from age discrimination it applies to everyone but has particular relevance to older Australians. The Age Discrimination Act of 2004<sup>7</sup> “protects individuals from discrimination on the basis of age in employment, education, accommodation and the provision of goods and services. The Act was amended to make it possible to appoint an independent Age Discrimination Commissioner for Australia. The Commissioner is located in the Australian Human Rights Commission. I was appointed the second Commissioner in 2016 and my 7-year appointment concluded at the end of July last year. As Commissioner I focussed on a number of issues but my major focus was on older workers, women at risk of homelessness, elder abuse and counteracting ageism.

Sadly and I regret to say that ageism is an issue in Australia and affects older people in various situations for example – in hospital and aged care, seeking employment and even within families. A recent Australian study of the prevalence elder abuse found that one in six older Australians reported experiencing abuse – and it could take the form of psychological abuse, neglect, financial, physical and sexual abuse. The research also found that perpetrators of elder abuse were often family members.<sup>8</sup>

There are various initiatives which have been developed to assist those experiencing abuse –for instance there is a national helpline, community legal centres offering legal assistance and mediation for families, and programs within hospitals. There is also an active group called Elder Abuse Action Australia<sup>9</sup>and a number of the States have given authorities increased powers to deal with this issue. However, there is

much more to do and one of the initiatives to counteract elder abuse is to develop programs to reduced ageism.

For example my team at the Commission developed elder abuse awareness materials and undertook ageism training with more than 300 people working with older people. An immediate survey and a follow-up survey conducted 3 months later, after participants had attend a single 2.5 hour session produced very pleasing results such as 90% said they rethought the way they communicated with older pole, 86% considered actions they could take to address ageist attitudes in their workplace.<sup>8</sup>

Intergenerational Projects are another way ageism is being tackled. Our national broadcaster ABC has had two major projects one with very young children and another with adolescents in a 6 or so week-long program and highlighted the outcomes. I am not sure if you can see them in Japan on the ABC site but you may be able to see the one called “Old People’s home for 4 year olds” on Netflix.<sup>10</sup>

I have been involved in a wonderful project with 465 centenarians across Australia having their portrait painted by a teenager and the interactions between the generations have been magical – you can see this on line <https://www.embraced.com.au/100-canberra-virtual-exhibition>

I have tried to give you a quick sketch of “Ageing in Australia” – life for an older person in Australia is significantly better than for many older people across the world but we still have a long way to go to ensure that in Australian “human rights do not diminish with age”.

## References

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