

IMPACTS of an AGEING POPULATION on **NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY**

A Māori perspective

Adapted from an address by **Professor Mason Durie**, to the New Zealand Association of Gerontology 2007 conference: Ageing: The Everyday Experience

Perspectives on Ageing

Societal views on ageing are shaped by many experiences and prejudices.

A shift towards an ageing population has resulted in a greater visibility of older people within whānau and communities and has challenged society to rethink traditional attitudes towards older members.

When other New Zealanders might be contemplating withdrawal from public life, Māori elderly are often encouraged to accept new responsibilities expected by their own people - self interest will give way to the interests of whanau and hapu (sub-tribe).

Measuring Impact

Contrasting views on ageing and older people are also reflected in the ways that the impact of an ageing population on society is measured. Too often the context for discussing the implications of an ageing population on modern society is shaped only by the costs. What also need to be factored into the equation are the distinctive contributions of older people and the benefits that accrue to society as a whole.

Older People as Societal Assets

The costs of ageing are well documented but there have been fewer efforts to measure the contributions older people make to whānau, communities and future generations. A

series of contributory roles can be identified and although many of them are more readily recognised within Māori society, all of them have some applicability to wider society and to all sub-populations within New Zealand.

Older People as Carriers of Culture

The standing of a tribe, its mana, as distinct from its size, relates more to the visible presence and authority of its elders than to the vigorous activities of its younger members. Without leadership at that level a Māori community will be unable to function effectively or to fulfil its obligations. The roles ascribed to older people are not only positive, they are critical for the survival of tribal mana.

Older People as Guardians of Landscape

Attachment to the land underpins indigeneity and in Māori society older people have responsibilities as kaitiaki (guardians) of the land. To many, the essence of being Māori is to be found in the nature of relationships with the environment. The quality of those relationships is largely dependent on the ways in which elders act as guides, so that the relationship can be experienced first hand and better understood by whānau.

Older People as Anchors for Families

In many cultures, older people act as anchors for families. They are accorded positions of responsibility and in turn provide avenues for family connectedness. Though they may have little active involvement in day to day activities,

their contribution to family events and to the family identity has the potential to be a major source of strength to younger members and especially to families with children.

Older Māori men and women live active lives, physically, socially and culturally. Contact with families is close and responsibilities and obligations are reciprocal.

Older People as Models for Lifestyle

Older people act as counters to younger generations especially those who are more inclined to adopt risk-laden lifestyles. For whatever reason, risk taking and risky lifestyles are less prevalent in later years

Older People as Bridges to the Future

Older people are not confined to living in the past. Laying the foundations for Māori health research for example was largely a function of older Māori women. They wanted answers to questions about the health of Māori women that captured Māori values, ideals and actual situations.

Older People as Bulwarks for Industry

Compulsory retirement at age 65 robbed communities of accumulated expertise and wisdom. Skills gained over four or more decades were suddenly lost to the workforce and with them, product understanding, intuitive know-how and sector networking. Legislative changes have created opportunities for older people to choose when they will retire and to continue working alongside younger colleagues.

Now around 40 percent of men and 20 percent of women aged between 65 and 70 years remain active participants in the workforce.

Older People as Leaders of Communities and Nations

At an age when retirement from public life might seem an attractive proposition, Māori elderly often find that life becomes busier rather than quieter. In contemporary Māori communities there are particular roles which are enhanced if they are filled by older people. Those roles include speaking on behalf of the tribe or family, resolving disputes and conflicts between families and between tribes, carrying the culture, protecting and nurturing younger adults and children and recognising and encouraging the potential of younger members. With advancing years both men and women are expected to demonstrate spiritual leadership and to satisfy tribal needs in either religious or cultural contexts.

Valuing Older People

Older people add distinctive elements to the life of the nation and enrich the quality of life for younger generations. Valuing older people from all cultures and allowing them to remain active members of society will bring consequential gains for the country as a whole.