

President's Message...

Laurence Wee

Major Milestones of Gerontological Society : 2006 - 2009

Warm greetings to all our members and readers.

How time flies!

It seemed like only yesterday when I took over the reins of President from Mr Henry Lim in Aug 2006.

Nevertheless, it has been a good three years working together and I have enjoyed every moment of it with the wonderful support and cooperation from all our Council members in promoting the aims of the Society together.

As I recollect, some of the major highlights we had included the celebration of our 20th Anniversary held at York Hotel in early 2006. We had a public forum with the theme: Responding to An Ageing Society, and our guest of honour was Dr Balaji Sadasivan. He fielded questions from an enthusiastic audience regarding the recommendations of the Committee on Ageing Issues (CAI) which he and Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman co-chaired. The recommendations are an important milestone in addressing various issues and challenges in the context of a rapidly ageing Singapore.

I am also reminded of last year's GS Annual General Meeting in August when Mr Heng Chee How, Minister of State for Prime Minister's Office was our guest of honour. He highlighted, among other things, the ageing trend in Singapore; and more importantly, his concluding key reminder to us: "Population ageing affects us all. Similarly, I believe that achieving successful ageing will require close partnership among all of us. While the government holds key policy levers, the community must be involved to receive and look out for their seniors."

Last year we began the series of the Henry Lim Lectures, the first was held at the National Library on 19 Jul 2008 to a full house. The idea of the Lecture was mooted by Prof Kua Ee Heok, Senior Consultant Psychiatrist, National University Health System. He shared that it is good to give due recognition to someone of Mr Henry Lim's stature, given his invaluable contribution to our Society and his passion in the field of development of gerontology in Singapore.

Another major milestone was the revamp of our website after so many years. The internet highway of information is increasingly something which we cannot do without and to neglect this medium of reaching out to people will have its dire consequences. If you have not visited our new website, I welcome you to do so (www.gs.org.sg). Though it has a new look, right now the challenge as always will be to keep it updated.

Our 1st Vice President and NMP A/P Kalyani Mehta will be representing the Society in the coming IAGG conference in Paris this July. We trust that she will bring back invaluable information and lessons from our overseas counterparts to share with us.

Finally, I want to thank all our GS members and partners for their unwavering support all these years. A special note of thanks to my mentor and friend, Mr Henry Lim.

I leave the Society with the knowledge that it will be in good and capable hands of the in-coming Council Members. I am confident that they will bring the Society to greater heights – with your support.

I wish one and all good health... and stay active! 

Out-going GS Council 2008-09

Mr Laurence Wee	President
A/Prof Kalyani Metha	1st Vice-President
Ms Kwek Puay Ee	2nd Vice-President
Mr Henry Lim	Hon Advisor
Ms Anita Ho	Hon Secretary
Ms Diana Koh	Hon Treasurer
Mr Lye Fei	Asst Hon Treasurer
Council Members	Dr Fong Ngan Phoon
	Dr Chow Yeow Leng
	Dr Chiang Hai Ding
	Ms Mary Low
	Mr Tristan Gwee
Hon Auditor	Mrs Betty Ong
Hon Legal Advisor	Mr Dennis Lim

THE YOUNG AND THE OLD-STAYING CONNECTED

by K.V.Veloo

I did not realise that I was growing old until a young lady to whom I was introduced at a function thought it was socially correct to address me as “uncle”. As though this was not enough, she heralded her companions throughout the evening to meet the “uncle”. My chances of being a little fresh with her were shattered. I thought this was too much. I had just crossed 55 and was in full control of my faculties. My ego was deflated. I had to admit, nevertheless, that I was growing old in the eyes of the young.

The following morning on arising from bed I studied myself intensely in the bathroom mirror. It did not appear that I had aged except for a few strands of white hair taking root at the sides of my crown. My hair showed early signs of receding to the back but definitely not to the extent of creating a barren island on the top. I could still comb my hair with the aid of my faithful “Brylcreem”. The only defect, if any, was that my belly button that seemed to have grown out of shape possibly because of the weight around my waist line which had increased to 38. I have a few spare tyres to carry. No woman, however, has ever insinuated that my abdomen was an unwelcome impediment when doing a waltz with me.

I was at Parkway Parade one afternoon when I saw a group of young lads at a shop promoting exercise equipment. They were fascinated with a device that measured the heart-beat rate. They were comparing their heart-beat rates. Their average score was about 80. They were taken aback when I asked them if I could also check mine. It was 70. They could not believe it. They even went to the extent of slotting another 20 cent coin at their own expense into the machine to recheck my reading. “How come, you are old and can have a lower score?” It reminded me of the 1950 hit song “Anything you can do I can do better” from the movie “Annie get your gun.”

Attitudinal Barriers

Our young are by tradition, culture and breed respectful to the old and are customarily filial to their parents. The young lady who addressed me as “uncle” is an example. I do not think it is her disposition to sideline the old as being staid and decrepit. It is something that is culture bound. There is, however, a difference in being respectful to the old and viewing the old disparagingly as

people intended for the scrap heap.

All of us will grow old. Some of us may, as we reach our 70's and 80's, become frail and sick. Still others may be bed-ridden and dependent on others. The optimistic part of growing old is that the overwhelming majority of old people, (nearly 94%), is ambulant and well. They can take care of their activities of daily living. They lead socially useful lives and remain as contributing members of society. Many among them are educated, well-informed and affluent. They form a reservoir of talents, abilities and experience.

Growing old gracefully and in place are sometimes made difficult by attitudinal barriers that devalue old age. We are all aware of the myths and prejudices surrounding old age. It is sometimes referred to as “ageism”. Old people are regarded in the stereotype of a “spent force” and by implication unworthy and hence to be ostracised socially and economically.

What Can We Do?

If we want the young and society in general to look up to us as contributing and socially useful members, we need to take ownership of our image. We cannot remain on the backstage and expect others to fight our cause. We must take steps to remain physically and mentally fit and alert so that we can continue to live a normal life for as long as possible. This does not mean that we have to pump weights or work out strenuously at a gym competing with the young body builders or gear ourselves for competitive sports and athletics. It is a matter of engaging in regular keep-fit exercises that we enjoy and maintaining good health practices. This, of course calls for personal discipline. We do not want to risk shrivelling on the vine too early in our ageing process. It is said that a person is as old as he thinks himself to be. One could learn much on pre-retirement planning, maintaining a socially active life and remaining connected with the community.

We must also remain socially active, engaged and connected with the community. It depends much on pursuing some interest or activity or sharing our abilities and experience with organisations of all kinds, not necessarily those related to social service organisations that help the poor, the handicapped and the disadvantaged. Opportunities for volunteering one's services exist in humanitarian relief, community

and civic organisations, social and correctional services; religious, spiritual, educational, cultural and sports organisations. The National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) is a resource centre for advice and assistance to anyone who wishes to volunteer his or her services.

Connecting with the Young

We need to make quality time with the young in order to bridge the so called “generation gap”. The old sometimes assume that the present generation of youth disregard parental authority and are ill-disciplined. We use this assumption to indict our youth. Each generation of youth has its share of problems of growing up. It is more difficult for our present generation of youth to grow up normally in a climate of fear of nuclear war, terrorism, depletion of the ozone layer and the environment, and the threat of pandemics, to name a few.

The approach to youth must be on the basis of our understanding of their sub culture. This can best be achieved through intergenerational activities. Our problem is that we tend to find comfort among our own age group. Our leisure outside our family is often centred on age-segregated activities. There is nothing wrong in being a member of a mutual aid group or senior citizens club or passing our time with our peers at a community centre learning to do the “cha cha”, having monthly luncheons or just indulging in idle gossip at a coffee-shop. We must also make time for activities involving youth.

There is no better way to put ourselves in a positive light than participating in or be spirited spectators of the activities of young people.

Understanding their Music and Dances

Not long ago, a friend and I went for a stroll after dinner. We were attracted to a discotheque within the hotel premises. We went in and before we could find a table, this friend of mine persuaded me to leave the discotheque helter-skelter. He argued that if he had stayed behind a little longer, he would have either become hearing impaired or visually handicapped. He had a cultural shock seeing young people gyrating to the din of swinging electric guitars. It reminded him of the “voodoo dance” performed by witch doctors in the jungles of Haiti. I could understand his concern of becoming hearing impaired because of the blare but why fear of becoming

The Frail and Sickly in China

Tristan Gwee

During a visit to north eastern China recently, I had the privilege of visiting a nursing home for the elderly and interacting with them. Initially, I was taken aback by the rundown condition of the nursing home when compared to the ones I had seen in Singapore.

In the high dependency ward, many of the elderly were already bedridden. Unable to speak much due to their weakened conditions, I reached out my hand to stroke them to let them know my presence. The care staff who was with me explained to me in detail each elderly's condition. I also observed how affectionately they addressed each elderly and how their faces brightened when spoken to.

Then it struck me. What was lacking in terms of physical amenities was more than made up for by the human touch provided by the local staff there. They spoke the same language as the elderly and they found comfort in that.

Here in Singapore, we have nursing homes, some with beautiful facilities and gardens. But to an elderly person who is no longer able to get down from the bed to smell the flowers, what use is that? I would prefer a loving touch, a kind word and a familiar face anytime. 



visually handicapped? It seemed the twinkling psychedelic and laser lighting (that are very necessary to provide a disco ambience), could adversely affect his eyes. He did not take me favourably when I protested that the convulsive gyrations to the brawling music of electric steel guitars are part and parcel of youth sub-culture. He thought they were all on designer drugs. No wonder young people look down on old people as being square, uninformed and dated.

We need to understand and comprehend their music and dances: the hard rock, heavy metal (like Metallica, Nirvana and Guns & Roses) and its sub genres, reggae (Bob Marley) hip hop and rap. We cannot live by the nostalgic memories of the soothing ballads of Nat "King" Cole, Frank Sinatra or Perry Como alone. When we were rocking to the music of Bill Haley and His Comets or those of Elvis Presley our parents had thought that we were crazy. We must not distance ourselves from youth just because we do not approve and appreciate their music, dances and life styles which in reality do not often verge on loose morals or unabashed practices.

Modern Technology

Some of us feel threatened by all the latest gadgets that float in the market. We do not understand them and, hence develop an inherent distaste or distrust for modern technology and assistive devices. I marvel at the young with their smart

phones that seamlessly roam the internet, take pictures, record music and even shoot films at a press of a button. I know some of my friends who have yet to purchase a personal computer. I am sorry for them because they are really missing countless hours of information and enjoyment the internet can give. Most of all, it helps one to link up and be connected with friends in any part of the world with speed and ease.

While we cannot keep up with the dexterity of the young in manipulating contemporary technical gadgets like hi-fi and home theatre systems, MP3 players, iPods, 3G mobile phones, laptops and PDAs, we must at least know what they are and be acquainted with them.

Not long ago, I was in a bus on my way home. It was half empty. Seated next to me was a retiree who was working hard at his mobile phone. Out of curiosity I asked him what he was trying to do. He said he was trying to send a message to a friend to meet him for lunch. He was rather frustrated that he could not get it right after so many attempts. I suggested that it would be faster if he used the predictive text input or the template if it was a one-liner. He had not heard of such short-cuts even though he has had the hand phone for sometime. When I suggested that he could capture names of persons in the dictionary, he was terribly upset. He had not heard of the function of the dictionary in his mobile phone. No

wonder the young label us as cop-outs, wash-outs and drop-outs.

What the Family Can Do?

If anything goes wrong with the social fabric of our society we tend to blame the family, the school and the government. The family, no doubt is one of the basic social institutions responsible for the socialisation of a child. It is the first group in which a child lives and is essential to the formation of his/her social nature and the development of attitudes. It can play a healthy part in projecting the old as having residual potentials and abilities. Hence, how we, as parents view and regard our own parents and other old people will be deeply embedded in the child. It will reflect the child's attitude to old people in later life.

Conclusion

In summary, most of us are concerned when we reach 50 or 55. We all like to age gracefully. This becomes difficult if society, especially the young, devalues old age. Old people become the butt of ageist or unsavoury remarks like "second childhood", "dirty old man" and "sugar daddy" and worse.

We need to remove the fallacy rife among some quarters that the old are dependent, stagnant and immutable to change. The public will then accept us as individuals who possess desirable qualities that are assets to the community to be utilised fully. 

OUR VOICE

by Henry Lim

The pleas for one voice for older people or for strength through unity are responses to the lack of co-ordination and continuity among organizations working with or representing older people. A frequent complaint is that there are too many older people's organizations, leading to confusion and duplication. The perceived result is a lack of focus and poor representations of the needs of older people to government, especially in the social partnership negotiations. The search for the simple solution of one voice and one organization is understandable but must be resisted. It's an illusion, and a dangerous one at that. There is no one voice or organization that can adequately represent all the views of the nearly two hundred and fifty thousand people over 55 years of age in Singapore today.

This group includes workers, the unemployed, the retirees, people in rural and urban areas, people with various disabilities, independent people and those requiring varying levels of support for income, housing, health and transport. The variety of circumstances and needs is diverse. How will this diversity be represented while pinpointing the critical issues affecting all older people?

We need, not one voice, but a Choir – a choir to which different groups lend their melodies as contributions to the common tune of improving the quality of life for older people. The steps toward a soulful choir could include:

- Organizations for older people coming together to devise a common platform setting out common goals and key issues;
- Publishing a common platform with short summaries of the interests and activities of individual organizations, and
- Identifying common priorities for submission to Government for action.

Multiple groups representing older people may look like duplication, but each can lend a melody to the common tune of improving life for older people in our society.

GS would like to work with local organizations to provide this forum for older people to contribute their voice to policy and service development.

There is a clear need for a national lead to enable this to happen and the call of Mr Gerard Ee to have a Institute of Gerontology (IOG) is most welcome. However, to enable this to happen there will

need to be a coming together of NGOs concerned with older people so that their common interests can be identified.

Primarily the goals of our proposed IOG will also include hosting a network which is regional wide and hosting a series of National Seminars and a biannual Regional Conference to promote the development of policy, practice and research on elderly services in the region.

The conjunction of the growing numbers of older people, the beginning of a debate which sees them as a resource as well as consumers combined with the need to regenerate communities may well offer a convergence of interests in which more leisure amenities, education and lifelong learning are at a maximum shared areas of interest for the development and promotion of independence for young and old members of the communities.

GS is ready to play its part in this big Choir – to provide a platform for all older people to contribute their voices in the development of policy and services relating to elderly issues. 

IAGG World Congress Meeting, Paris July 5-9, 2009

by Henry Lim

Dr Kalyani Mehta, our 1st Vice President will be participating in the IAGG World Congress Meeting, Paris, July 5 – 9, 2009. Dr Mehta has been granted a small bursary to pay for the registration fee. Members please note that the token value of such bursary will always be determined in relation to the number of applications but is unlikely to exceed S\$2,000.00 per annum.

In the forthcoming IAGG Meeting, we learned that to date there were already 4,390 proposals for communications and more than 500 proposals for symposiums

For Geriatrics medicine, 591 communications on frailty, osteoporosis, sarcopenia, 335 on Alzheimer's disease, 239 on vascular diseases and 229 on nutrition, 85 on nursing homes.

Concerning Psychological behavioral sciences, 285 are related to psychological aspects of ageing and 81 on behavioral disorders. For social gerontology, 257 concern integrated models of care and 278 concern Welfare and policy.

A total of 91 countries are represented and from the above we can see that Gerontology is growing all around the world.

With so many presentations with each having a global expertise there is every opportunity where new findings from important research will be featured.

It is our hope that the IAGG Congress will contribute to making Gerontology a major discipline in all future care for our elderly. 

2nd Henry Lim Lecture In and around the Scene...

GOOD NEWS OF AGEING...

Public Symposium organized by Gerontological Society
30 May 2009 @ York Hotel.
Sponsored by: Novartis and Lee Foundation



Prof. Goh Lee Gan... on Formula for Successful Ageing



Dr Lee Chong Kau... on Art Therapy



Mr Henry Lim... How to be Happy



Prof Kua Ee Heok... our live-wire chairman

Catching up... at tea break



...Successful Ageing candidates?



Our Symposium participants... in rapt attention



Lively Questions from the floor



Laurence Wee ... Music Therapy "River of No Return" backing by Mr Henry Chua of THE QUESTS' fame



Had a stroke? The elderly may not know, or remember ...

Older adults often do not realize or may even forget they have had a stroke and may not be a reliable source of medical information, U.S. researchers said on Monday.

Brain scans showed that while just 12 percent of seniors asked about strokes remembered having had one, nearly a third had brain damage showing they had.

The stroke itself could damage memory, and many people may also have so-called silent strokes that are never diagnosed at the time, Dr. Christiane Reitz of Columbia University Medical Center in New York and colleagues wrote in the Archives of Neurology.

"Stroke is associated with motor impairment but can also be accompanied by impairments in

memory, sensation and speech or language, diminishing the ability of an individual to accurately report a history of stroke," they wrote.

The team studied magnetic resonance imaging or MRI scans of 717 people 65 or older who were covered by the federal Medicare insurance program for the elderly. "Approximately 75 percent of strokes occur in persons older than 65 years," the researchers wrote.

The volunteers were interviewed about their health and took some basic neurological and psychological tests. Patients and their caregivers also completed a survey about stroke history, including whether they had stroke symptoms or had been told they had a stroke.

Nearly 12 percent, or 85

people, said they had. But MRI scans showed 225 people, or 30 percent, had actually suffered a stroke.

People who got it wrong were more likely to have poorer memory or language ability, or have stroke risk factors such as high blood pressure or a history of a heart attacks. Younger people in the study were more likely to get it right.

"However, it is likely that some of the strokes that were not reported were silent strokes," the researchers wrote.

The team said researchers who want to study stroke in older adults need to rely on MRI scans, and not patients, to get accurate information about stroke history.

Courtesy of Weblog de Fraga:
<http://weblogdofraga.blogspot.com/>

*Congratulations To
Dr Chow Yeow Leng
We wish you well in
your new appointment
as Asst. Professor
with the Alice Lee
School of Nursing
Studies, NUS*

Upcoming AGM 2009...

The 23rd Annual
General Meeting of the
Gerontological Society
will be held on Sat,
29 August 2009 @ 2.00pm
at York Hotel.

One of the items in the
agenda will be the election
of office bearers.