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AGEING ISSUES? IT'S CALLED GERONTOLOGY

~ Dr Kevin S Y Tan, lecturer, 1st Master of Gerontology Programme, School of Human Development and Social Sciences at SIM University

Most of us have heard it all before — Singapore is an ageing society and up to one-fifth of all Singaporeans will be above the age of 65 by the year 2030.

In addition, to make matters more interesting, Singapore will be one of the oldest societies in the world by 2050.

With such developments in place, one cannot help but wonder why no one has given a unifying name to such “grey matters” that have provoked the concern of so many in our society.

I believe it is time to do so because there is actually one, and the term is known as **gerontology** or the scientific study of ageing.

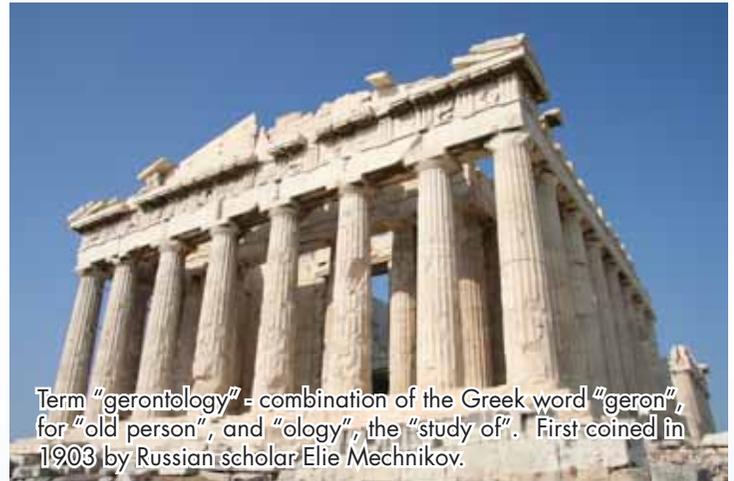
After nearly a century, the term **gerontology** is now firmly established as an academic and research field in its own right along with the creation of various international and professional associations.

The fact that a Gerontological Society in Singapore has been in existence for 25 years may also come as a surprise to many Singaporeans, both young and old. But still, there seems to be an unexplained reluctance in Singapore to apply the word whenever discussions on ageing issues arise. Could we be waiting for someone high up in political authority to first publicly use the term in order to legitimise its usage? I believe that the term has a very crucial place in our attempts at making sense of Singapore's ageing society. There are two obvious reasons.

Firstly, as we have already noted, it is hardly a new word. Would similarly referring to economics as “money issues” be as acceptable? Or how about replacing psychology with “mental issues”? To do so would seem strange to many of us, because once we neglect these terms we also lose something else, as they represent bodies of valuable knowledge that have been derived over the years through continuous research and reflection.

The second reason is perhaps more critical: While some have already begun to champion the growth of a so-called “silver industry” (I actually prefer the more down-to-earth “grey”) as a result of a more educated and more well-off baby boomer generation entering their “third age”, this had led to a tendency to neglect the fact that ageing is also a very complex and unique process for everyone.

We should not oversimplify crucial facts and deny ourselves a broader understanding of ageing issues in Singapore. No one ages the same way, and along that same track, we can also say that no one ages equally.



Term “gerontology” - combination of the Greek word “geron”, for “old person”, and “ology”, the “study of”. First coined in 1903 by Russian scholar Elie Mechnikov.

Such inequality is also compounded by many factors. They include the growing income gap between Singaporeans; the rising numbers of the aged who are single and at risk of social marginalisation and loneliness; the impact of gender and cultural differences on the quality of life of the aged; the social and psychological challenges of retirement; the disabled elderly; care-giving issues that often spiral into new problems of physical abuse and financial strain; and the growing recognition of how various forms of dementia such as Alzheimer's disease will become a serious challenge for populations with greater longevity.

In an environment that is increasingly dominated and colonised by market rationality and a cost-benefit view of how human relations should be conducted, using the term serves as a definitive marker of what our main concern should be — the persons experiencing the process of ageing, which happens to include all of us sooner or later.

It signifies that all other interests — be it profit-making enterprises, economic development or political contingency — should never be in a position to supersede the personal well-being of older persons as a priority when we talk about “ageing issues”. Take, for instance, how the so-called “silver industry” has been increasingly defined as an industry only for those who can pay for it; and how older employees are often unfairly stereotyped as “liabilities” in our workforce.

A growing recognition of the term **gerontology** and its meaning and relevance to our society will be just one small step, but an important one for Singapore society, as we work towards forging a more socially-conscious and caring society for the aged.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE... AGM 2011

Warmest greetings to one and all.

Time flies and 2011 has indeed been a very busy year for the Society. Since the last AGM, the Council had been laying the groundwork and making preparations for the Asia-Pacific Conference on Ageing (APCA), which was from 24th - 26th March 2011, Marina Mandarin Hotel. It was also a joyous occasion for the Society as we celebrated the 25th Anniversary.

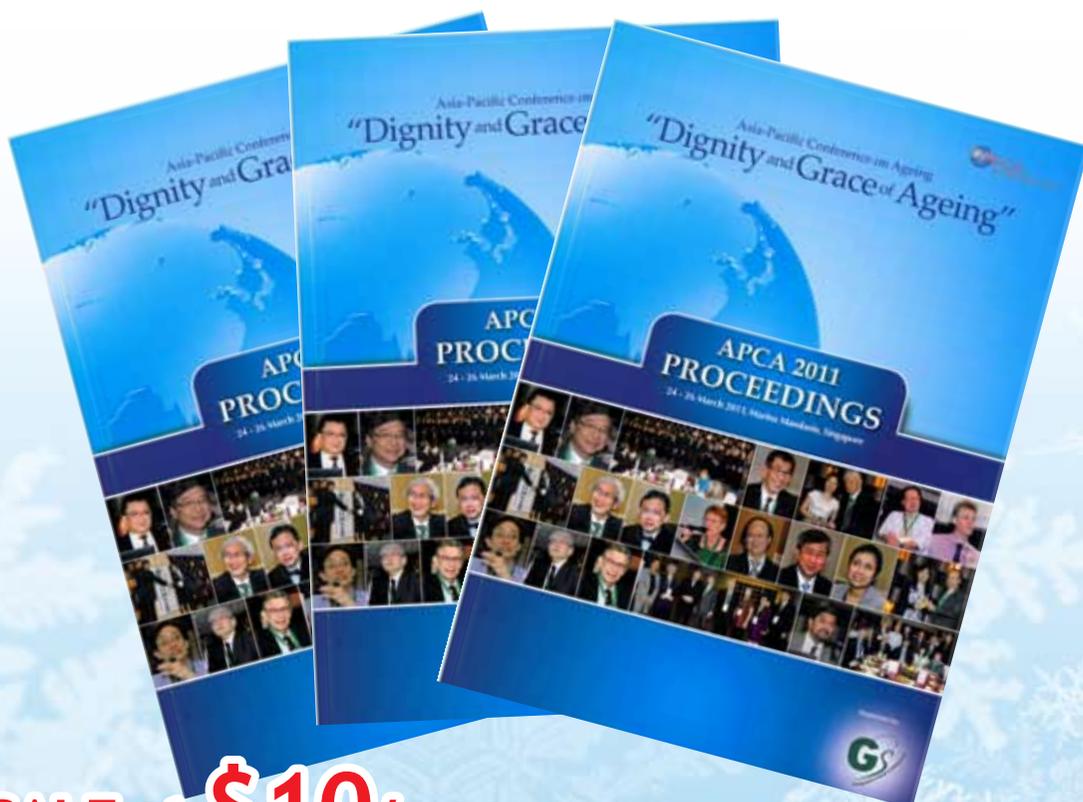
For a 3-day conference, you cannot imagine the number of meetings involved, and the effort and time organizing it. And we did it with a modest budget and small secretariat with lots of volunteers. My sincere thanks to the Organizing Chairman, Mr Laurence Wee, Scientific Committee Chairman, A/P Prof Goh Lee Gan, Shirley, Tristan and many others who as supporting cast ensured the success of this splendid conference.

Looking ahead, we will be organizing the Annual Singapore Conference on Ageing (ASCA) next year. It will be a wonderful conference to look forward to - more details later.

Once again, we need the support of all members and partners.

Professor Kua Ee Heok
27 August 2011

APCA 2011 PROCEEDINGS BOOK



For SALE at \$10/ copy
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CATCHING UP WITH THE TIMES...

“Technology is a paradigm of how the elderly must learn to deal with change they have not yet encountered.”

Kenneth M. Lim, 18
National Serviceman, participant
APCA 2011

OUR society is dependent - almost reliant - on technology, for better or for worse. It is difficult for any adolescent or young adult to envision an era without the ubiquitous television, mobile phone or computer. Yet to people who were born far before the onslaught of the dot-com boom, such appliances were once luxuries. Such appliances did not shrink dramatically, or grow a radical new feature every two years. Such appliances were technology that did not need to be understood except to a select few at the frontiers of a specialized industry.

Then everything changed.

DOS grew up and became Windows XP, MP3 players and Palm Pilots got married and became iPods, television grew so much larger and had kids called Plasma and LCD. And in the midst of all the changes the idea arose that it was never too late, or too old for one to learn something new. The more adventurous of the elderly decided to attend courses and become formally acquainted with technology.

Then everything changed. Again.

Windows XP grew old, and around came Windows Vista and Windows 7. The iPods upgraded themselves and became iPhones and iPads. Television became bulimic, changed its name to HDTV, and had another kid called LED. Those who had worked to come within a hair's breath of technology were, in an instant, left in the shadow of modern advances.

Mention of the elderly often raises connotations of diminished reflexes, resistance to change, and a foreboding sense of being disregarded by society. Page upon page of stories have been and can be written about the young leaving out the old for any number of reasons, yet those that make it that far are normally serious circumstances. What we fail to realize is that such phenomena is happening even on a mundane scale. Youths, out of familiarity, use technology at speeds beyond comprehension of the elderly. Some who are more curious may attempt to observe the young in a bid to understand how technology works, but no doubt all they see is a flurry of finger movement and changing graphics on the screen. Above all, there is little incentive for youths to launch into a discourse of their actions, partly because much of it has been internalized by daily practice, and partly because their level of interaction with technology has predisposed them to an intrinsic understanding the elderly cannot hope to acquire in a year or two.

We cannot teach Info-communications Technology (ICT) the same way we teach English, History, or Art. It is a trivial matter of knowledge transfer to familiarize participants with an interface, telling them that a certain button in a certain location, when clicked, performs a certain function. Any parent, any schooled child and any teacher will concur that it is easy to be lulled into a false sense of accomplishment when you hand-hold your target audience. Technology changes too quickly. Companies can and will change the layout of their interface, introduce new functionality

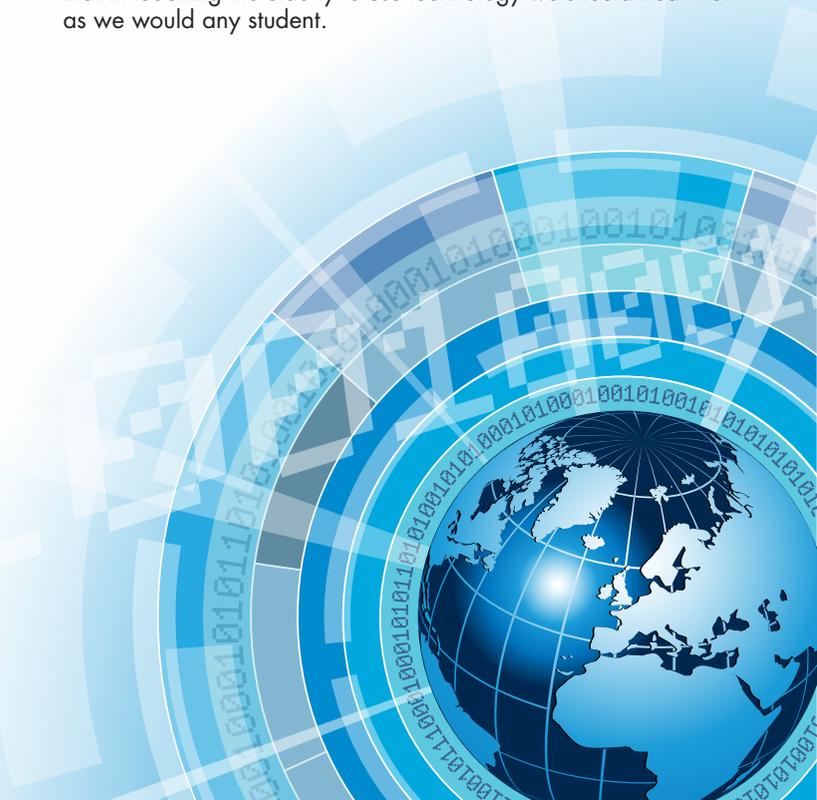
and streamline established protocols. All it takes is one such change to throw the elderly off track. This remains a valid generalization until we begin teaching ICT to the elderly the same way we teach the young - by preparing them for what has yet to come and not what has already happened.

At the start of the symposium a speaker requested for assistance with displaying his slides in slide-show mode. He had worked with an older version of PowerPoint, and was thus unfamiliar with the new interface. The problem however, is that the position of the buttons and the hotkey required to move into slide-show mode in PowerPoint has remain unchanged since early versions of the software.

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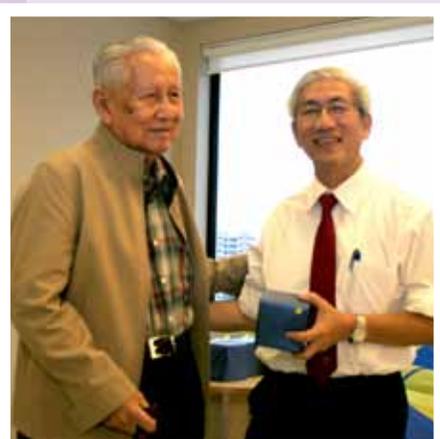
An innate fear of handling the unknown often prevents many elderly from boldly experimenting with technology. The young are often asked how they seem to know the exact manner of performing a certain function on the computer. While understanding how a computer works is instructive, we do not know everything. We Google, we click, and we try. The philosophy of problem solving we apply is not that much different from many other aspects of life. In fact, the elderly, having access to a wider breath of experiences, would probably do better than us if they got a finger in the pie.

“Technology is a paradigm of how the elderly must learn to deal with change they have not yet encountered.” Be it's mastery seen as a conduit for interaction with the young, or a mark of not being left out by the rest of society, if it is our intent to eliminate the stereotypes of ageing then what should be upheld above all is the philosophy that in teaching the elderly to use technology we should treat them as we would any student.



Highlights of 25th AGM & Forum 27 August 2011

Showing our appreciation to the young and old...



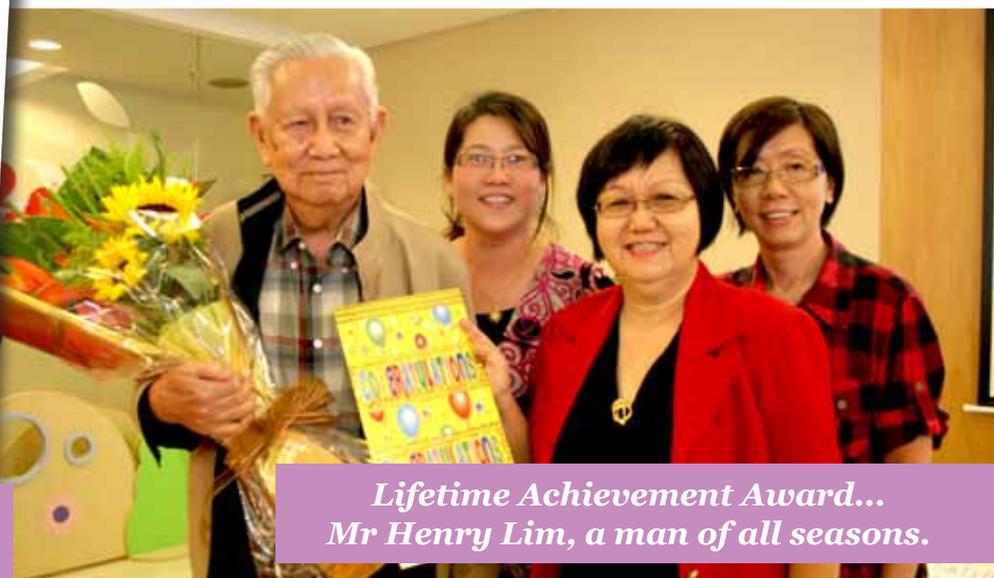
Question of the age...



Tokens of appreciation to outstanding members



What are the needs of the elderly?



Lifetime Achievement Award...
Mr Henry Lim, a man of all seasons.

THE POTENTIAL OF OLDER VOLUNTEERS

A Challenge to traditional ways of thinking about making the best use of older volunteers! By Henry Lim



The demographics of the current and future older volunteers are an important indicator as more and more educated and affluent population are likely to volunteer their services.

As service providers we must take note that older people today have more education and are somewhat financially better off than prior generations and their overall health status is in better shape.

While the baby boomers are a more heterogeneous population than previous generations, their overall education, health and financial status are better than any preceding cohort and because of the positive association between education, income and volunteerism the likelihood of volunteering is greater among the current cohort of middle-aged and older adults.

The increase in educational levels also creates a more active older-adult population with more professional or technical skills. These demographic changes are occurring in cultural context in which the stereotypical view of a passive and disengaged older person is eroding and new images and concomitant roles are emerging. The culture continues to evolve in it's awareness that "older people are a resource in responding to societal needs through both paid and unpaid work."

With the continued dramatic growth and changing demographics of our Singaporean over the age of 60 and the potential of the elders to volunteer to meet social needs, identification of adequate and appropriate opportunities to attract and retain these individuals as volunteers in the area of home and community-based care for the elderly is important.

Historically, older people have made important contributions to eldercare informally and through religious organizations. It is important to realize that facilitating volunteerism among the current cohort of middle-aged and older adults involve appropriate action from well-prepared individuals,

organizations and policy-makers. Yes, the baby-boomers are more educated and financially more secure than their previous cohorts and thus more likely to become volunteers, but they still need to be recruited and trained as volunteers in the area of home and community-based care, where the unmet needs of the frail elderly are great.

However, it is also necessary to recognize that not all potential volunteers have the same constraints or needs. Consequently, if possible, a variety of incentives from which to choose should be offered. Adequate resources, co-ordination across agencies and thoughtful organization are necessary to help to meet the needs of the frail elderly through volunteerism.

Based on current demonstration across agencies, the model of having a central agency to coordinate, recruit, train and provide incentives to elder volunteers is

effective. However, such an undertaking requires substantial resources. For this to occur, two important factors are required.

First, community-based agencies must be oriented to the new generation of volunteers so that they can understand volunteers' capacities. Second, appropriate placements and clearly defined job descriptions are essential. Agencies will need to reassess how volunteers can best be utilized in order to recruit and train them.

Without any doubt, volunteers will need to play an increasing role in the provision of services and service agency administrators and public officials will have to be more creative in their thinking about how to attract and retain volunteers, especially given the increasing technical expertise among this cohort of older volunteers.

I conclude that the big questions here are volunteers, particularly senior volunteers a way to meet some of the future care needs of the elderly?

"older people are a resource in responding to societal needs through both paid and unpaid work."
Henry Lim

FaceTime with a GS Member ...

1. How did you come to know about The Gerontological Society ?

I attended a Public Seminar on " Preventing Falls For The Elderly" which was organized by The Gerontological Society of Singapore.

2. When did you become a member?

In 1997 I joined as an ordinary member, and applied to be a Life Member, three years later.

3. Why did you decide to be a member?

I find the topics and issues discussed presented and discussed at the Talks, Seminars and Conferences informative, educational and crucial to the process of Ageing. At one Seminar, I heard a Geriatric doctor share that her husband, an eye surgeon operated on her 101 year old patient to remove his cataract. This centenarian was then able to have the eyesight to read the newspapers. I told my 70 year old uncle, who was resistant to having his cataract removed because of fear and anxiety, this case, and managed to convince him that it was a safe surgery. I took him to this same surgeon. The operation enabled him to see well again. Whatever knowledge I gained from the Health Professionals and Experts in the various field not only benefited me, but those with whom I could share the information with.

4. What is your role as a member?

Besides giving support to GS by participating in the events, I encourage people to attend the events organized by GS. I have served GS in small ways. Currently, I am a Council Member. By getting actively involved in the Society, I have achieved a sense of belonging to this Society. The commitment and dedication of the founder members of GS as well as the contributions of various prominent leaders in the Medical field, has brought the Society much achievements over 25years. This indeed, is a great inspiration to remain an active GS member for life. If you have ideas on how you can contribute to the Society, please contact Tristan at tristan@pcs.org.sg.



Ms Ellen Cheng

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Happy New Year Ahead

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