



Conference for Older People on Life Enhancement - Translating Research into Practice

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NUI Galway
OĒ Gaillimh



COPE Galway



Conference for Older People on Life Enhancement

Translating Research into Practice

The Conference for Older People
took place on Tuesday May 4th 2010
at the Galway Bay Hotel

Conference Report

Prepared by:
The Irish Centre for Social Gerontology
& COPE Galway Senior Support Services

Supported by:



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This report has been prepared by the conference team, who included Christine De Largy, Áine Ní Léime and Kieran Walsh for the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (ISCG), Anne Kenny and Fintan Maher for COPE Galway and the ISCG's Consultative Committee.

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Foreword



By Eithne Carey
*Conference Chair,
Member of the ICSG's Consultative Committee*

Reports on seminars ought not to be put on a shelf to gather dust but rather should be used as tools in our on-going research and in developing and improving services for older people. It is hoped that this report on the recent seminar, ***Life Enhancement: Translating Research into Practice***, will become a useful tool for all those who have the interests of older people at heart.

It was hoped that the conference would be participatory, that our speakers would serve as conduits and would encourage comments from the floor. This proved to be the case and we hope that, having read the report, you will agree.

One of the aims was to empower older people to open up dialogue between themselves, service providers and policy makers. They need a 'hands on' approach, an opportunity to take part in decision making through research. Older people have a lifetime's experience, great wisdom, expertise in many areas, and should be a strong informed voice on matters which concern them. One of the ways to enable this is to be able to access and understand relevant research.

Life is a continuum and old age is simply the final phase of that cycle, one to be embraced, enjoyed and used to help to allay the notion that it is something to be dreaded. We must all play our part in proving that older people are not one homogeneous group, but individual people.

We hope that we adhered to our core purpose of making sense of research. May it go some way in encouraging older people to participate in further research and in helping to ensure that its findings find practical expression in the development of services and are not left to become dust collectors!

Eithne Carey
August 2010

Why This Conference Was Organised

This conference was jointly hosted by the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (ICSG) at NUI Galway and COPE Galway Senior Support Services. Research completed on older people is all too often seen as detached from real life or perceived to be meant only for those who work in universities. What we wanted to do in the conference was to show the importance of research for older people; how older people could be active in the research process and how they could use research to lobby for their own rights and entitlements. This conference report outlines the background to this conference, what happened on the day, what was talked about by the speakers and what were the key points coming from older people participating in the conference. This report has been sent to those who participated in the conference and to key voluntary and statutory stakeholders in ageing.

COPE Galway Senior Support Services



COPE Galway

promote healthy ageing through community based support, by providing information and advice in relation to health, welfare and housing issues and the provision

of health promoting activities.

COPE's services for older people include the Community Catering meals service, the Sonas Day Centre in Mervue and our community development projects in the Renmore and Headford road areas of the city. Our services are provided by paid staff and volunteers and they are developed in consultation with older people. Volunteers working with older people provide a range of activities such as art, music, yoga and craft programmes.

While the ICSG is primarily a research centre on ageing and COPE Galway's Senior Support Services are predominantly concerned with supporting older people to live

Irish Centre for Social Gerontology is a



multidisciplinary research centre on ageing at NUI Galway. ICSG focuses on research and education in the field of social gerontology in Ireland and internationally. The centre also engages with local and national stakeholders, policy makers and older people.

The ICSG aims to develop and promote a holistic and positive view of ageing, which emphasises participation and empowerment for older people at all levels of society. The first centre of its kind in Ireland, ICSG offers research expertise and practical support to public, private and voluntary agencies involved in the formulation and implementation of public policy for older people.

independently in the community, both organisations aim to improve the quality of life for older people and to ensure that the voice of older people is heard. COPE Galway and the ICSG believe that rigorous and timely research, that closely involves older participants, is one way of achieving this aim. In addition to assisting relevant policy makers and voluntary and statutory organisations, research can enhance older people's own knowledge and help them to advocate for what they are entitled. However, the ICSG and COPE Galway recognised that there were a number of shortcomings in relation to academic research on ageing and a

number of barriers preventing older people from using such research. For example, research is often not readily accessible to older people in the community; older people may not be aware of the research that exists or of how to use research for

advocacy; older people may also be asked to participate in research and never hear of the outcomes.

It was felt that a joint conference would provide an opportunity for the ICSG and COPE Galway to come together with older people and discuss older people's views, experiences and involvement in research. The ICSG's Consultative Committee was also central in this process and in designing and organising the conference. The Consultative Committee is comprised of older people from the local community who work with the ICSG on specific projects and in an advisory capacity. It was very important to the Consultative Committee that the conference would emphasise the potential of older people, while at the same time helping to translate existing research into clear understandable language. For that reason it was decided that the conference theme would be *Life Enhancement: Translating Research into Practice*.

Although it was critical that the conference would feature experts from ageing research, the conference needed to be about more than just presenting information. We wanted to ask older people what they think is important and how they think they should be involved not only in research but also in their communities and in advocating for their own needs. Consequently, we decided to ensure that older people would be the main participants on the day. In addition it was decided that the speakers at the conference would also include older people who had participated in research. The conference had the following objectives:

1. To present existing research on life enhancement for older people in an accessible format.
2. To provide older people with the opportunity to discuss participation in society, empowerment and advocacy.
3. To demonstrate how research knowledge can enhance the voice of older people in society and to support their participation in advocacy and lobbying activities.

What Happened On The Day

Approach and Structure

From discussion between the ICSG Consultative Committee and the ICSG/COPE Galway conference team, it was decided that *participation for older people, empowerment*



through research and advocacy for older people were the three areas that should be explored under the theme of life-enhancement. How older people participate in Irish society, how older people access and are involved in research and how older people advocate for themselves were seen as a set of fundamental interrelated questions for ageing in Ireland. As we wanted this conference to be as much about the older people

participating in the audience as the speakers on each of these topics, we needed a more inclusive structure than that of the traditional conference format.

We wanted older people to be participants in the day's events, providing their own perspectives, and not just passive delegates receiving information. For that reason, after every speaker, participants at each conference table were asked for their viewpoints on the topic. In this way the speaker's presentation served not only to provide information, but also to encourage people to think about the topic and to stimulate discussion and feedback. There were 11 tables in all. Each table was facilitated by a conference volunteer who, in addition to chairing the discussion, kept the proceedings focused with two questions per topic to guide the discussion. Importantly, there was also a note taker at each table to record and feedback the key points of the table's discussion. It is these notes that form the basis of this conference report. The speakers' presentations lasted for 25 minutes, with five minutes for points of clarification. The discussion sessions after each presentations lasted for 35 minutes.

Conference Speakers

An important factor in ensuring the success of this conference was to identify notable experts in each of the areas. Speakers not only required an in-depth knowledge of their topic, but also an ability to relay this knowledge in a clear and understandable manner. The conference speakers were as follows:

Participation for Older People

Professor Eamon O'Shea spoke on participation for older people with a presentation entitled '*what does participation mean for older people in Ireland today?*' Eamon is a personal Professor in the School of Business and Economics and a member of the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology at NUI Galway. Eamon's main research interests are



the economics of ageing, rural gerontology, and the economics of the welfare state. In addition to an extensive journal and book/monograph publication record, he has also been responsible for 16 national policy reports. Eamon's work has been influential in setting the agenda for the ongoing reform of the long-stay sector in Ireland. *E-mail:* icsg@nuigalway.ie

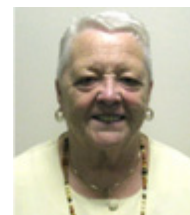
Empowerment through Research

Dr. Cathy Bailey spoke on empowerment through research and her presentation was entitled '*empowered to take part: ICSG's user forum and opening up dialogue between older people, service providers and policy makers.*' Cathy is a social scientist with an applied background in nursing and many years experience of working on community-based, public health projects. Cathy joined the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology in 2007 and has recently been involved in a multidisciplinary Irish research programme: Technology Research for Independent Living (TRIL www.trilcentre.org). She worked from within a falls and older adults research strand and developed a research portfolio on the social aspects of falling. From within ICSG, Cathy works closely with older people to promote a holistic and positive view of ageing. *E-mail:* cathy.bailey@nuigalway.ie



Advocacy for Older People

Dr. Una Lynch and **Ms. Anne Watson** spoke on advocacy for older people. Their presentation was entitled '*older, louder, stronger: advocacy and the changing ageing partnership.*' Anne is a widow, 70 years old, and Vice-Chair of Newtownabbey Senior Citizens' Forum. Anne has been actively involved with the Changing Ageing Partnership (CAP) for about three years. When employed Anne worked in the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association. *E-mail:* abwatty@googlemail.com



Una is Research Manager with the Changing Ageing Partnership, in the Institute of Governance, School of Law at Queen's University Belfast. A nurse and midwife, with an MSc in Community Health from Trinity College Dublin, she has worked in public health practice, education, policy and research in Ireland (North and South); Bolivia; Central America, Ghana and with the WHO European Headquarters in Copenhagen. She completed a Doctorate in Governance in 2007 and her thesis was entitled Public Health: why are the Cubans so successful? *E-mail:* u.lynch@qub.ac.uk



Conference Participants

As with the conference speakers, it was also very important to consider the conference participants and who the audience should include. We wanted our conference participants not only to comprise of older people, but to have a representative sample of older people that included different age groups, people from different backgrounds, people from urban and rural areas, and both members and non-members of community and active retirement groups. In other words, we

wanted to have a group of people that represented the diversity of the older Irish population.

We promoted the conference through local newspapers, put flyers up in a range of community settings, and also advertised it on the local radio. We worked with local urban and rural agencies and service providers to inform older people about the conference and to encourage participation especially amongst older people who would not typically attend community and conference events. We also contacted local active retirement associations, family resource centres, and community groups to assist in promoting the conference amongst their members and target groups. Sixty-eight older people participated in the conference, with approximately six people per conference table (eight including facilitator and note taker). As planned, the participant group on the day included members of active retirement groups and community groups, people from urban and rural areas, people from a wide range of backgrounds, and people who were not members of any older adult groups.

What Was Talked About

This section of the conference report will summarise the key messages from each of the speakers' presentations. It will also describe the feedback of the conference participants' on each of the topics. We will follow the order of the conference schedule focusing first on *participation for older people*, followed by *empowerment through research* and finally *advocacy for older people*.

Participation for Older People

Presentation Summary

Eamon's presentation looked at how older people participate in Ireland and the barriers that prevent older people from realising their full capabilities.

Older people are a diverse population with a diverse set of skills, perspectives and resources. They make a valuable contribution to the economy through their participation in the labour market, through spending and consumption, through savings behaviour and the transfer of financial resources and monetary support to younger generations. Equally, older people contribute to social life through their role as grandparents, care providers and more generally through the transfer of knowledge and wisdom to younger generations. Older people work as volunteers, as social activists, as advocates, developing strong communities and social capital across the country.

Yet many barriers exist that prevent older people from making a full contribution to economic, social and cultural life. Ageism is a key barrier, particularly where it leads to exclusion and discrimination. Low expectations among older people can sometimes combine with ageism to create a self-fulfilling prophecy of exclusion from normal economic and social levels of participation. As a consequence, poverty and social exclusion are problems for a small but significant minority of older people. Problems with health and disability can also lead to some older people not being able to fulfil their potential. Maximising participation requires that ageism is addressed in Irish society.



Leadership and training programmes for older people would also raise expectations and prepare older people for a greater participatory role in society. Taking a lifecourse perspective would also facilitate health promotion, equality and improved quality of life throughout the life cycle. In general, older people need to become more visible through social inclusion measures that seek to maximise participation. Essentially, the richness and variety of the ageing experience should be celebrated through an emphasis on the capabilities and diversity of older people.

Participant Feedback

The discussion of participation for older people was framed around the following two questions:

- How should older people's interest in society be encouraged?
- What structures should be in place to facilitate older people to take part in society?

One of the themes to emerge from the discussion around participation concerned the need for older people to feel welcomed and respected within their own communities. It was felt that this would not only provide older adults with an enhanced sense of belonging, but to encourage and foster participation in society as a whole. Understandably, participants highlighted that when older people perceived

Older people need to feel welcomed and respected within their own communities if their participation in society

themselves as not being a part of a community or not respected within the rural area, village, town or city where they live, then they are less likely to engage with the community and participate in its activities and its functioning. The conference participants identified lack of experience with technology, mixing with younger generations, and not having enough money as three areas that older people are self-conscious about with respect to participating in the community.

The need for active leadership for older adults was highlighted by a large number of conference participants. In almost every discussion group, the role of active retirement groups was highly regarded. However, older people would like these or similar associations to be developed further. Conference participants highlighted that resources are necessary to properly promote such organisations to assist older adults to actively participate in society. From the perspective

Resources are necessary to support active leadership amongst older adults with respect to social, cultural and political participation

of the conference participants, the lack of support so far correlates with or explains the relative absence of older people within Irish society. Volunteering was mentioned as a means for older people to feel a part of the community, but the difficulty in accessing information about volunteering opportunities was seen as prohibitive. It was proposed that centres for older adults should be established in communities so as to encourage older people to obtain information on rights and entitlements, services, health promotion, volunteering, events and organisations of interest. These centres would also provide older adults with models of engagement and participation which could be used to encourage additional groups and resources for older people. The term 'One-Stop Shop' was frequently used to describe participants' vision of the centres, which were envisaged to have a strong social dimension enticing older people to



'One-Stop Shop' centres could provide information on rights and opportunities for social participation.

socialise with others over a tea or coffee.

One of the main issues that older adults emphasised throughout the discussions on participation was the segregation between the older and younger generations and lack of intergenerational integration. Most older adults would be more willing to socialise if they were able to mix with people of different ages instead of only with other older people and members of 'active retired' groups. This reflects not only an interest in other age cohorts, but the current lack of structures to facilitate interaction and integration, and as a consequence, a perceived isolation from younger generations. Existing intergenerational projects, such as oral history days

There is a need for more intergenerational programmes and activities.

and craft programmes, were praised by the conference participants. An educational programme involving transition year students working

together with older people on various projects, run by NUI Galway, was especially mentioned. A number of participants suggested that an organisation or a group that specialised in promoting and organising intergenerational projects and activities is needed. It was felt that there would be benefits around intergenerational solidarity and building confidence amongst older people for greater participation.



Finally, the conference participants highlighted that there are a number of infrastructural and resource barriers to participating in Irish society. The financial cost of activities, events and group membership were in some instances viewed as limiting older people's participation in social, cultural, sporting and even political aspects of Irish life. In this manner, people felt that participation in society was stratified by the socio-economic status of the different sections of the older population. Funding specifically for these forms of participation was mentioned as a means of addressing these issues. Where that is not possible, it was suggested that concessions for older people should be more widely available. Transport was viewed as a significant issue for older people wanting to participate in their communities. While those living

in rural areas were particularly at a disadvantage, frequency and accessibility of public transport was highlighted as being problematic for all older adults. Efficiency of service and efficiency of cost was also mentioned. Essentially, to encourage more participation from older adults who do not own cars, public transportation was viewed as a fundamental requirement to enable them to become more active in the community.

Funding and transport issues can be barriers to older people participating in Irish society.

Empowerment through Research

Presentation Summary

Cathy's talk focused on a user forum which gives users of a service, in this case older people, an opportunity to deliberate upon and take part in decision making about services and public policies. Cathy's presentation reflected on recent experiences of

facilitating a six-day user forum on 'who cares for older adults in county Galway' and included contributions from two of the user forum participants, Alf and Fionnuala Mc Lochlainn.



This form of participatory or action research provides a practical, 'hands on' example of opening up dialogue between older people, service providers and 'experts', with the potential of creating new pathways to policy makers. Older people participating in the user forum identified and prioritised issues important to them and reached consensus about how such issues might be tackled. To gather further information, the participants called on experts and drew on their own considerable experience and expertise, challenges and coping strategies. In this way older people can be empowered to inform service provision and, potentially, shape policy.

A critical objective of running the forum was to hear from those who were not used to 'joining a group' or 'speaking out', as well as those who were dealing with particular challenges such as a chronic health condition or disability. It is crucial to the validity of research involving and being led by older people, that the more isolated individuals who are less likely to volunteer and seek out these research opportunities are included in such projects. Whilst not representative of county Galway's older adult population, it was also important to reflect the distinctiveness of a rural and Irish-speaking location.

Such research activities hold a lot of potential benefits for both older people and the communities in which they live. There are, however, a number of challenges that must be addressed to ensure that projects like the user forum are a success. Older participants must be engaged on their own terms: clear information about what taking part will entail should be provided; adequate time to consider whether they want to participate has to be given; participants must be listened to in terms of their needs (e.g. length of session; their views on talking in groups). Funding needs to be secured that can provide adequate transport, refreshments and venue facilities. Finally, sufficient support and commitment must be given by those who are facilitating the research and those service providers, practitioners and policy makers who are contributing to the research. This includes the use of understandable and clear language.

Participant Feedback

Participant discussions on empowerment through research were framed around the following two questions:

- What are the reasons that older adults may not want to take part in research?
- In what ways should older people be involved in research?

A recurring concern throughout the discussion tables was the issue of privacy and the intrusive measures used in some research. The conference participants stated that trust with respect to how the research will be conducted, what the research will be measuring, and how the research findings will be used are all major issues surrounding participation in research. Participants were apprehensive about the motive for conducting the research. Those who had taken part in research before were not always aware of the kind of information the researcher wanted to find out and use. Older people at the conference described how they become self-conscious

Efforts to establish trust between researchers and research participants must be made.

when they participate in studies because a lot of the time they feel that they are

just being used as 'guinea pigs'. It was clear that for many conference participants participation in research was perceived as consisting of clinical invasive experimentation, rather than non-invasive social, psychological, cultural and political research.

Ultimately, the conference participants said that most research comes across as intimidating, especially for those who do not feel confident in their understanding of



the research topic or in their own academic abilities. Older people emphasised that they need to be provided with as much information as possible to help them to decide whether they want to participate or not. This information should include a description of any ethical concerns related to the research and how the researchers will address those concerns. Use of findings and privacy with respect to personal details were two

ethical issues that were particularly mentioned in this regard. Similarly, conference participants felt that the interaction between the researcher and the participants was often impersonal and cold. Steps that were suggested to ensure the participant would feel comfortable included having an older person on the ethics committee and one-to-one interaction between the researcher and older person so that the participant feels they have more control over the research process.

Clear information must be provided on how the research will be conducted, what information is required and how the data will be used.

Conference participants were very much in favour of older people themselves conducting research on ageing and on age-related topics. All discussion tables reacted very positively to this idea and to the potential benefits it would have for the validity of the research and for the other older people participating in the study. With older people involved in deciding what should be researched, designing how the research should be completed, collecting the information and analysing the information, the research would benefit from the insight, experiences and understanding of someone who is ageing in Ireland. Having someone close in age to participants to conduct the research would also give the older participants more confidence to open up and to assert themselves during the research process. In addition, a number of conference participants believed that older people should be

instrumental in identifying priority areas that need to be researched for ageing in Ireland.

The necessary time commitment to participate in research was another point that was repeated across many of the discussion tables. Participants highlighted that older people were reluctant to participate in research projects because of the lengthy questionnaires, the unnecessary visits to

Older people want to be consulted at all stages of the research process where possible.

the researcher and the extensive process of data collection. When older people do not understand or have not been fully informed of the purpose and the aim of the research, then committing time to the study was seen as having no value. Conference participants suggested again the need for appropriate information provision, but also for appropriate research planning and coordination and consultation with research participants.



Advocacy for Older People

Presentation Summary

Una and Anne's presentation focused on the activities and projects of the Changing Ageing Partnership (CAP), which aims to empower older people to transform how they are viewed by sections of our society. To realise this, CAP is developing a holistic agenda that recognises that the diverse experiences of older people exist alongside issues traditionally associated with ageing, such as health and social care, economic independence and community safety.

The Changing Ageing Partnership (CAP) was established in 2006. A partnership between AgeNI, Queen's University Belfast and the Workers Educational Association, CAP's vision is of a strong informed voice capable of challenging attitudes and approaches to ageing. The presentation dealt with how research relevant to the needs of older people can be identified; how researchers can be encouraged to involve older people at all stages of the research; how older people have been supported to understand and access research relevant to their lives; and how older people have been supported to develop skills in lobbying and to advocate for changes in policy and practice.



Participant Feedback

Discussions on advocacy for older people at the participant tables were framed around the following two questions:

- What are the important areas that older people should advocate for?
- What structures should be in place to help older people to become advocates?

In terms of priority areas for advocacy, the conference participants concentrated primarily on the health and social care of older people in Ireland. Participants felt that more effective and efficient care services needed to be campaigned for by older people. Issues around reduced medical card coverage, medication use within older adult care, and issues around access and quality in Irish hospital care were areas within the health and social care system that were said to require further prioritisation. Transportation to primary and acute care facilities was also mentioned as a matter that requires

Health and social care and public transport issues need to be addressed through advocacy.

substantial improvement. Again, rural transportation emerged as a particularly strong theme within discussions. Participants asserted that transport was essential for all aspects of rural life and especially to access health and social care services within these communities.



Many of the discussion tables identified inadequate home support services as the principal issue that should be advocated for by older people - reflecting the fact that the majority of older people in Ireland want to be cared for in their own homes and communities. Conference participants stated that older people should advocate for a structure to enable them to live independently, which will allow them to have the autonomy of community life and the security of an appropriate community-based health and social care service infrastructure.

Older people need to advocate for formal care structures to support independent living in the community.

As per the feedback on participation, participants stipulated that older people should advocate for their own centres within the community that will serve as an information resource, a social outlet, a source of community activities and an educator on rights and entitlements. There was a collective desire to promote equality for older adults through advocacy and to lobby for intergenerational solidarity through intergenerational programmes and innovative policies.

The conference participants recognised that in order to be able to advocate effectively for these issues, substantial capacity building was required within the older adult population. Participants stipulated that training was required to assist

Leadership and communication training is required to help older people to become advocates.

older adults to participate actively in their communities. This includes using computer

and communication technology, leadership training programmes and lobbying and advocacy strategies. Coordination across groups of advocates was also suggested as a necessity for successful advocacy activities. In addition to creating a more coherent voice for older people, this would assist in cross-group learning and development.

There was a division among the participants between those who wanted the government to take an active role in encouraging older people to become advocates and those who thought that older people were capable of undertaking the challenge themselves. Those who suggested government involvement, stated that policy makers and statutory service providers needed to consult with older people on an active basis and pay more attention to older people's issues and needs. Those who believed that older adults can advocate for themselves mentioned writing into newspapers, calling radio stations, and organising meetings where older adults could be trained to become advocates for other older adults.



As many issues impact on people across the lifespan, generations should work together to achieve change.

participants highlighted that because many of the issues that impact on experiences of living do so across the age-groups, there needed to be an intergenerational structure to advocacy in Ireland. Such a strategy was seen as enhancing intergenerational solidarity, coherency of arguments and the strength of Irish citizens' social leverage.

Ageing in Ireland: The Value of Older People's Insight

As a part of the conference, Alf and Fionnuala Mc Lochlainn talked to participants about their experiences of ageing in Ireland, of participating in research, and of

Fionnuala Mc Lochlainn

'...now the boot is on the other foot and I am the one who is old'

When I was asked to speak to you about how I felt about being involved in this ongoing programme, I didn't know what I felt exactly.

This made me reflect and I realised that all the time in the back of my mind was an experience of many years ago, in the 1960s in fact, when I, with a few neighbours set up a committee to do something for the old people in the area – that was the Stillorgan area of Dublin.

We set up a club – the Wednesday club we called it, where the old people met once a week for the afternoon. We collected them and brought them home afterwards. Later we added meals-on-wheels twice a week to their homes and a social worker. But did we ever ask them beforehand? No – we did not. I now realize that our attitude was unacceptably patronizing and I am ashamed of my self.

Well, now the boot is on the other foot and I am the one who is old. I am the very same person I was forty-five years ago, but instead of looking after a large family, I now have to look after only myself, my own health and well-being and my husband, Alf.

And, thanks to a more enlightened outlook, I am now being asked to make suggestions as to how the lot of old people can be improved, how society's attitudes can be modified. I do sometimes wonder if my contributions are worth anything, whether what I say is unique to me or not. But I have sufficient trust in the good people who are involved in this study to appreciate that they have a large pool of people from diverse backgrounds feeding them information, that my view is only one of many and that such conclusions as they arrive at will be the product of this broad approach.

I myself have learnt a lot and I find it intriguing to be, in a way, both the subject and the object of the project. I have no doubt that the outcome of all this will be a more enlightened attitude towards the elderly than I myself had all these years ago.

contributing to advocacy and local policy development. While Alf and Fionnuala spoke about their own individual perspectives on ageing, their presentations provided a local example of older people's involvement – demonstrating the importance of including the voice and perspectives of older people in our communities, in research and in advocacy and equality frameworks.

Alf Mc Lochlainn

'...and not a whisper of Daisy Daisy to be heard.'

When King David the psalmist tells us that the number of our years is three score and ten, he means that seventy years is your lot, full stop. So I am clearly in extra time. When I reached the psalmist's three score and ten, I remarked to my son Ian that I had just become a septuagenarian. 'That's funny,' he said, 'you brought us all up as Catholics.'

In fact there is no magic about three score years and ten, or about the sixty five or the age of 68 which is currently being touted as the border between usefulness and the scrap-heap. There is no sudden change in body or mind on your 65th birthday, no such change as would entitle you to sit back and say 'well I've done my 40 years and now I'm going to enjoy the free time and amusements, the idleness and leisure which society owes me for all the years I spent in the workplace, office, factory mine or mill. So bring on those girls and have them play draughts with me, or bring me to bingo or sing '*Daisy, Daisy*' while they give me endless cups of tea.'

The character uttering those sentiments is notionally a man, because women are expected to go on working 24/7 as we say nowadays, or better still 24/7/52 without any sudden stepping stone at 65 or any other age. Indeed the attitudes of men to ageing are surely different from those of women, and the attitudes of society to the ageing of men is surely different from its attitude to the ageing of women.

We know conditions of weakness or dependency are shared with people of any age who have suffered loss of mobility, strength or alertness. What I have come to realise since the Centre [Irish Centre for Social Gerontology] concentrated my attention for a couple of years now is that we must constantly be aware of the danger that we will think ourselves into a kind of Catch 22 situation: we start out working to secure the equal participation of the elderly in society and almost immediately find ourselves thinking of them separately, as different.

I came to the conclusion that what is needed most urgently is a way of tapering a gradual decline of work in parallel with the mental and physical decline of the worker. This is already the practice among the self-employed and in certain professions and trades. Just as management and trade unions and government agencies grapple with the problem of devising such procedures, including help for housekeepers, men and women, so workers must accept throughout all ages the obligation implied in the old socialist maxim 'from each according to ability, to each according to need.'

My own experience will illustrate, though it is only recently I realised that it led me to my conclusion. My employers, for mysterious actuarial reasons offered me the opportunity to take early retirement, and I took it. And in retirement I had two further engagements, part-time, in paid employment, both exercising skills which had come my way in the course of my mainline job – I also undertook two voluntary commitments – I was an instructor in the adult literacy movement and as a member of a political party, I regularly assisted a local TD in his meeting with constituents.

I know I was lucky. Things happened at the right time for me, but it should not be beyond the capacity of management types in unions, business and the public service, to devise formal arrangements for similar phased disemployment – and not a whisper of *Daisy Daisy* to be heard.

Some Concluding Remarks

This report, and the conference it documents, was never intended as a means of identifying the solution to all age-related issues in Ireland. Nor was it meant as a means of developing strategies for the ageing sector in the future. Instead, this report describes a series of conversations with, and about, older people over the course of a single day. We wanted to highlight what people were concerned about; what people were passionate about; what people wanted to be done and what they wanted to do themselves with respect to participating in society, empowerment through research and advocacy for older people. We also wanted to convey the level of energy and interest that was palpable amongst conference participants and speakers in the Galway Bay Hotel on the 4th of May, 2010. To achieve this we tried to represent the participant feedback in as raw a form as possible, with little editing and little of our own interpretation. We hope that we have done justice to all those who participated in the conference.

There are a number of points that are interesting to note from the conference feedback.

Intergenerational solidarity was a recurring theme especially with respect to participation in society and advocacy. It is very clear that the older people participating in this conference wanted to form stronger links with younger generations. Such links could facilitate a respectful and reciprocal relationship within the community and foster contributions to social and cultural life. In terms of advocacy, there was recognition that many issues are consistent across the life span of a person and therefore require a coherent voice amongst the different generations to tackle such issues.

Transport emerged both as something that needs to be advocated for and something which is central to encouraging participation in society. For some of the conference participants it represented the core challenge for an ageing community and, for most, transport problems were related to the issues around access to services, facilities and social and cultural opportunities.

Like other reports and conferences on ageing in Ireland, ***health and social care issues*** dominated much of the discussion. While the efficiency and effectiveness of care for older people was certainly highlighted, participants wanted the Irish care infrastructure to view older people as more than just passive dependent care recipients. Even when requiring care, conference participants wanted to be supported in their autonomy and in their ***independence within the community***.

Similarly, conference participants emphasised the ***diversity of older people in Ireland*** and the heterogeneous set of needs, preferences, skills and beliefs that older people possess. Participants underlined the potential for older adults to be active informed citizens. Thus, while there was an acknowledgement of the need for support and capacity building with respect to participation (in terms of the proposed 'One-Stop Shop' centres) and advocacy, conference participants felt that ***older people should take a lead role in lobbying for their own rights and entitlements***.

This too was evident in terms of research. Conference participants felt there was justification for older people to be *involved in all stages of the research process*. This included: prioritisation of what needs to be researched; the design of the research study; identification of the ethical considerations; and the completion and reporting of the research. It was clear, however, that many participants currently felt disconnected from research in general, even if a study was focused on ageing and even if they had participated in it directly. Consultation and feedback are two components that need to be embedded within research that involves and focuses on older people. Conference participants did recognise the *worth of research*, but addressing these issues, together with using clear understandable language, would assist in creating a stronger ownership over findings. It would also encourage older people to more readily use research to advocate for improvements in their own lives and those of their peers.

The conference itself was evidence of the interest that older people have in research. Without the participation of the 68 older people, the conference could not have taken place. The accounts given by Anne Watson and by Alf and Fionnuala Mc Lochlainn offered powerful insights into how older people can be a part of the research process and how research can in turn inform and enlighten the perspectives of older people. Furthermore, not only did 100 percent of participants who completed a conference evaluation form (52 in all) find the conference helpful, but they also wanted to see similar conferences presenting research on other topics in the future.

From our perspective (the ICSG and COPE Galway conference team), the conference was very much a success. Although our respective programmes of work had made us aware of the substantial contribution that older people can make, this conference demonstrated once again the capacity of older people to become not only active citizens, but agents of change in Irish communities. It is important that we as a society keep this realisation in mind with respect to research, service provision, policy development and, perhaps most importantly, for the ageing experience that we will undergo ourselves.

The Conference Team
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