



Senator the Hon Santo Santoro Minister for Ageing

Speech

**Address to the Building Ageing Research Capacity Colloquium
National Museum, Canberra
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*(Note: Senator Santoro was not able to attend the event
and the speech was presented on his behalf by a senior adviser.)*

E&OE

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests.

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to The National Museum today to talk to you on the second day of your colloquium.

This is certainly a landmark occasion. Which is why it is fitting, before going any further, to thank and acknowledge some of the important figures and distinguished speakers of this colloquium.

I would like to acknowledge Professor Hal Kendig, convenor of the ARC/NHMRC Research Network in Ageing Well; Dr Diane Gibson, head of the Welfare and Housing Division at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; Professor Warwick Anderson, the CEO of the NHMRC; Professor Elim Papadakis (PAPA-DAH-KISS) from the Australian Research Council; and Barbara Squires, the chair of the Advisory Committee to the Research Network in Ageing Well.

It is also fitting to acknowledge the work of the late Professor Gary Andrews, who passed away in May.

Professor Andrews, I know, was internationally recognised for his far-reaching and conscientious work in the field of gerontology.

During my recent visit to the United States, I met with Dr Richard Hodes and Dr Richard Suzman from the National Institute for Ageing, and they both paid tribute to Professor Andrews' commitment and contribution in the field of gerontology.

I am told that his personal involvement with geriatric medicine extended back for nearly 50 years. He was an enthusiastic and tireless member of the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics.

His legacy has been to show us how research can be used to understand the multidimensional nature of ageing.

This good work needs to be continued. And that's where all of you come in.

There is, I realise, a wealth of talent sitting here this morning. The Research Network in Ageing Well, which organised today, represents many of the best Australian researchers in ageing.

The network also involves international collaborators, and I welcome those who are here today.

The Colloquium

This two-day colloquium is an initiative sponsored by the Australian Government, through several agencies. These are the Office for an Ageing Australia, within the Department of Health and Ageing; the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs; the Office of the Australian Safety and Compensation Council within the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations; the Department of Veterans' Affairs; and last but certainly not least, the ARC/NHMRC Research Network in Ageing Well. To you all, my grateful thanks.

The colloquium is the latest in a number of events organised under the auspices of the delightfully acronymed BARC – the Building Ageing Research Capacity Project.

In 2002, we had the Expert Forum, and in 2003 the National Symposium on Ageing Research.

As you know – but I think I should still say – the Government is investing in BARC and the ARC/NHMRC Research Network to the tune of \$6 million. Obviously this is to help build our capacity in the relevant research areas, but also to equip researchers and policy-makers with information and skills, and disseminate more widely research results.

In that regard, Ageing Research Online is an important repository of information, and I recommend it to you all.

The Howard Government is supporting this colloquium because it is bringing together all of you - a range of experts from policy development, research, business, service delivery and consumer perspectives - with the aim of focusing on ageing-related research and on effectively translating research results into policies and practices related to ageing.

It's obvious that policies need to be based on the best available evidence. But evidence needs to be complemented by a clear sense of direction and purpose if it is to inform policy.

Policy should not only be evidence-based, it should be value-based.

While it has always been, and always will be, important to pursue knowledge for its own sake, in a world where so many good causes compete for public resources, publicly funded research needs to focus on finding solutions to problems that have been identified through the political process.

And as I am a politician, I feel the need to say that good policy also requires a firm underpinning of philosophical, moral and political values.

The political values that inform the Government's vision of society can best be summarised as focusing on the individual and their family as supported by the community, not the other way around.

When these values are brought to bear in the field of ageing research, it leads to a preference for research that supports the implementation of policies that enhance and extend an individual's independence and capacity to make choices for themselves, and policies that enhance and extend the capacity for care to be delivered by those whose emotional and familial ties to the individual are the deepest and the closest.

I am sure you will agree that these are indeed worthy goals to guide the research agenda.

Importance of Research

Ladies and gentlemen, gerontology is becoming an increasingly attractive field of study, just as geriatrics is becoming a more important medical specialty. We are looking at the growth of a discipline that is not only important, and inherently useful to society, but also intellectually captivating.

Research is revealing that ageing just ain't what it used to be! It's a far more subtle process than we first thought.

As a layman, I happen to be particularly interested in mental health and the still largely mysterious workings of the brain.

The frontiers are daily being rolled back as we learn about the changes in the brain that accompany healthy ageing and compare those associated with, say, dementia and other conditions.

Are there ways in which we can promote the environmental conditions that are conducive to healthy ageing – and the natural changes accompanying it – and that delay the onset of pathological changes?

Recently in Washington DC, I met with world renown expert on Alzheimer's Disease, Professor Zaven Khachaturian, who explained to me the importance of intellectual stimulation for delaying the onset of the symptoms of Alzheimer's. He also advocated strongly for continued funding for collaborative multi-disciplinary research.

This is a very important message. People – perhaps, in particular, academics – need to put boundaries around issues and disciplines. We seek to understand by reducing a problem to its simplest parts.

This is not a criticism. I understand how necessary it is to isolate and reduce issues in order to investigate them.

But in the real world everything is connected. For example, how a brain functions cannot be examined outside the context of the whole person.

You know better than I that the human body is not unchanging. The physiology – even the architecture – of a brain, is more ‘plastic’, to use the experts’ term, than we used to think.

A brain continues to change throughout life, we now realise. While it may be difficult to teach old dogs new tricks, we know that people can and do continue to learn and adapt.

The real-life situation is dynamic. The brain obviously influences behaviour but, in turn, behaviour and lifestyle influence the continued development of the brain.

So the human brain can indeed be affected by how a person lives. Or how a person is cared for. And those factors, in turn, are influenced by the society of which that person is a part...and by the financial, political and moral imperatives that help to fashion that society.

And that is where my world intersects with yours. You see, we are all in this together, and we must combine our disciplines and professions to achieve the best outcomes.

Government Initiatives

Therefore, the Government is investing heavily in building up the nation’s capacity to carry out relevant research, in making this research cross-disciplinary, and in disseminating the findings.

The last part – dissemination – cannot be left to chance. It is just as important as anything else. The best research in the world is useless if left to languish in an unread journal.

We need to ensure that people on the ground benefit from the research we finance, and the intellectual horsepower that we are tapping into.

There is no doubt that Australia has a brilliant record in many areas of scientific and medical research. The Prime Minister has observed on a number of occasions that, as a country, we produce far more quality research than you’d expect on the basis of our population.

As the PM put it, we ‘punch above our weight’ on the international research stage. We are well regarded among other developed nations for our efforts.

But there’s always room for improvement. Part of my job is to seek out the capacity in age-related research that’s already here, and then feed and water it so that it will grow!

And as it grows, I must ensure that it is suitably harnessed to drive the changes in policy, in treatment and in care options.

Of course, not all research is the same. Even if research is intellectually robust and well conducted – and I’m sure that in Australia most is – we still need to pick the studies that are most relevant for our needs.

In terms of a ‘whole-of-life’ approach to healthy ageing, the future will depend critically on conducting the right kinds of research right now.

You could say that picking the right research now will help ensure that all of us in this room have a better ageing experience when our turn comes!

Ageing Well, Ageing Productively

A cornerstone of our efforts in that regard is the *Ageing Well, Ageing Productively* research program.

This program will provide significant, long-term funding for the kinds of multi-disciplinary research we need to continue improving the quality and delivery of health in Australia.

Furthermore, the program encourages the continued economic and social participation of people as our population ages.

Ultimately, the program is designed to gather the evidence upon which to base policy decisions.

It was devised in response to the research priorities which the government announced in 2002. It is an encouraging example of a promising collaboration between the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Research Council.

Today, ladies and gentleman, I am delighted to be able to announce that the Government has decided to provide nearly \$10 million to fund research under this program.

This is a hefty investment in a worthwhile cause. The money will come through the two research councils – the NHMRC and the ARC – with each contributing \$5 million.

The *Ageing Well, Ageing Productively* program will run for five years.

Grant Awardees

And now I come to an announcement that I'm sure many of you are waiting to hear.

Many applications were received for funding under the *Ageing Well, Ageing Productively* program. Nearly all were of a very high standard.

I am pleased today to announce the first grant recipients under this program. Six projects have been selected to receive generous funding to enable their research to go ahead.

The type of research we have selected is absolutely fascinating and, I'm sure you'll agree, is worthy of our support.

Let me give you a brief run-down – and I stress that this is brief and therefore somewhat simplistic – of these six projects. Forgive me, but in the interests of brevity I will not include all the details. However, you can get further information from my office, the NHMRC or the ARC.

We have a fascinating study of the interaction between genes and the environment in healthy brain ageing and in age-related disorders of the nervous system. This is led by Professor Sachdev at the University of New South Wales.

A University of South Australia project, led by Professor Andrew Gilbert, focuses on the issue of elderly people with several different health problems needing to take a range of

medicines at the same time. This is important because 80 per cent of 85-year olds have four or more chronic conditions requiring simultaneous treatment.

From Charles Darwin University, Dr John Condon leads a team to examine of some of the assumptions behind the ageing-related policies and services provided for older Indigenous Australians.

Associate Professor Kaarin Anstey, here at the ANU, will lead a project designed to draw together data from the nine Australian Longitudinal Studies of Ageing, which included more than 50,000 participants.

The aim is to identify the main factors involved in preventing diseases, reducing ill-health and promoting successful ageing in Australia.

Another project about ageing well comes from the University of Queensland and is led by Professor Annette Dobson. This research will gather information on lifestyles, health, and social and economic factors from many thousands of older people from around the country. The project will also use the data to assess a range of topical questions, including asking which health and lifestyle factors can be used to predict good mental health in older age.

And please tell me as soon as you find out!

Just as important as the previous examples is research on policy.

The University of New South Wales and Professor John Piggott's team will be supported in a project to assess the demographic and economic impacts, under various different policy scenarios, of people continuing to work past traditional retirement ages. This work will examine pensions, superannuation, finance, taxation and employment strategies that will affect older workers.

Ladies and gentlemen, in my descriptions of these projects I have reduced major intellectual challenges to only a few words. I hope you will forgive me. These projects deserve to be talked about in far more detail to do them justice, but I simply don't have the time to do that in my speech today.

Frankly, you have better things to do – and more important things to do – than sit and listen to me.

But please spread the word about the seriousness with which we are approaching this sort of research.

I know that staff in the Department of Health and Ageing are excited about the opportunities coming from this funding, and will be monitoring progress and ensuring that findings are widely available to everyone.

There is no doubt that identifying the factors capable of preventing disease, reducing ill-health and promoting engaged and successful ageing will hugely improve the quality of life for all older Australians.

Before I finish, let me also briefly mention dementia.

As you know, this Government declared dementia a National Health Priority in 2005. Dementia is a major concern, for we know that the incidence of the condition will increase with the ageing of our population.

Dementia is now one of the leading causes of the non-fatal disease burden in Australia.

In this year's Budget, the Government announced \$70.5 million for research, improved care initiatives and early intervention programs for dementia.

Just two weeks ago, I announced a new focus to our dementia research with the establishment of three new Government-funded Dementia Collaborative Research Centres.

We will be putting a sizeable chunk - \$16 million - of the Government's total dementia spending towards large-scale, multidisciplinary research projects.

This new collaborative approach to dementia research is in line with the approach in *Ageing Well, Ageing Productively*. It is an important investment.

The idea is to get dementia researchers working in partnership with aged care service providers, clinicians and carers to improve the quality of life for people with dementia and to provide better support for their carers and families.

And that, surely, is a worthy aim.

Conclusion

Perhaps because I was recently in Washington, I'd like to finish with a quote from an American President – the sixth President, John Quincy Adams

I think you'll find this relevant to the work that you do.

Adams said: "The influence of each human being on others in this life is a kind of immortality."

Let's think of that every day, to use it to inspire ourselves in our work.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for listening to me today, for the work you do, and for being involved in the many aspects of cherishing our older Australians.

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