

THE RESEARCH RELATIONSHIP WITH OLDER PEOPLE: PROMOTING GOOD PRACTICE

**Friday 8th December
Yungaba Conference Centre, Brisbane**

WORKSHOP REPORT

With the support of the ARC/NHMRC Research Network in Ageing, the Australasian Centre on Ageing at the University of Queensland convened a Workshop on the Research Relationship with Older People on 8th December in Brisbane. The aim of the workshop was to bring researchers and older people's organisations together in order to facilitate understanding and optimise research practices. The workshop was attended by 23 participants including researchers, representatives of older people's organisations and government agencies.

Professor Helen Bartlett, Director of the Australasian Centre on Ageing, introduced the workshop and explained its significance to the Network and the workshop goal to develop useful guidance that could be widely disseminated across the Network. Dr Jeni Warburton, Senior Research Fellow from the ACA, outlined the workshop format and the context for exploring the research relationship with older people. She explained that the aim of the workshop was to create two sets of guidelines outlining best practice with regard to research with older people: one set for researchers, and another for older people themselves.

Following introductions by participants, small working groups containing a balance of researchers and representatives from older people's organisations were formed. The discussion focused on three general areas: expectations and level of involvement, facilitators and barriers, and improving practice. The small group deliberations on these questions were reported back to the whole group in order to formulate the central concepts for the guidelines.

Outcomes

1. Expectations and level of involvement

*What do community members expect from research?
What do researchers expect from community members?*

In terms of expectations, participants felt that community members expected:

- A genuine/useful outcome of the research

- Confidentiality
- Research that is relevant to participant's lives
- Reimbursement of costs incurred

Expectations which apply to both researchers and community members included:

- Truthfulness
- Reciprocal benefits
- Both parties to make their expectations clear from the outset
- Clear communication (including of research findings)

2. Facilitators and Barriers

What helps us meet these expectations, and what barriers do we face?

Participants felt that the following were barriers to achieving the above expectations:

- Costs and travel
- The fragmentation of seniors' groups (including the impact this has on the dissemination of the results)
- Contacting individuals rather than groups
- Fear
 - Lack of understanding
 - Jargon
 - Privacy/confidentiality
- Negative assumptions about older people
- Obtaining representation of the older population
- Language – achieving a common understanding
- Hearing and vision impairment
- Technology – emails may not be accessible technology for older people, or not a suitable form of communication
- Unrealistic research time frames

3. Improving Practice: Moving Forward

What can we do to meet these expectations/facilitate this level of involvement?

Participants suggested that the following issues require consideration if we are to improve practice.

- Meaningful and useful research
- Clear and appropriate communication
 - Researchers should not rely on information sheets alone
 - Information should be jargon-free
 - Social opportunities for participants and researchers to meet
 - Senior researchers to make initial contact

- Clear outline of the purpose of research
- Managing expectations – including what not to expect (e.g. most researchers do not act as advocates for older people's issues and merely provide data that can be used by advocates)
- Participant involvement
 - Participant involvement in the design of the research
 - Improving the feedback process throughout the research project
- Strategies to develop ongoing partnerships particularly with older people's organisations
- Dissemination of results
 - local free newspapers could be effective for dissemination
 - joint dissemination by researchers and older people's groups to key stakeholders
 - annual event held by research groups to disseminate findings – launch of results
- Flexibility – it was acknowledged that researchers' timelines and methods could be very rigid, and that where possible there should be room to accommodate the needs and wants of participants
- A more person-centred approach

The guidelines/principles

While the intended outcome was two set of guidelines, the relevance of this was debated. Some participants felt that two sets of guidelines may be too divisive. It was decided that a few broad, basic principles would be preferable.

The central concepts identified were:

1. Relevance of research – including explanations of this
2. Clear communication of the study and the methods
3. Integrity of the researchers and research
4. Respect for older people
5. Consultation with older people (where appropriate)
6. Recognition of diversity of older population
7. Focus on the positive aspects of ageing
8. Appropriate terminology with respect to older people
9. Level of research made clear e.g. honours, masters, PhD
10. Desire to build understanding and break down myths about older people
11. Training for working with human participants required
12. Acknowledgement of research participant contributions

These concepts will form the basis of the guidelines which will be developed by a small working group of workshop participants. All workshop participants will be invited to comment on drafts as they are prepared.