

Executive summary

Healthy ageing directions

- Healthy ageing is gaining momentum as an important goal for all societies experiencing unprecedented rapidity and scale of population ageing. (1.1)
- Australian governments are taking the lead in promoting the health, well-being and productivity of older people. The National Strategy for an Ageing Australia framework places healthy ageing as one of its four main directions. (1.2)
- These Commonwealth and State initiatives recognise that research-based knowledge is crucial to guide the individual and collective action necessary to realise the potential of healthy ageing. (1.3)
- The Commonwealth, States and Territories are developing a coordinated national framework for advancing a more positive and enlightened view of ageing. (1.4)
- The Commonwealth State and Territory Strategy on Healthy Ageing recognises the critical importance of research in contributing to ‘evaluation of care and support services; prevention of illness; better interventions in treatment; and elimination of barriers to participation’. (1.6)
- In broad terms there is clearly some reorientation towards the promotion of more holistic healthy ageing research in Australia. What is lacking is a well-coordinated, targeted, national effort that can mobilise capable researchers and research organisations to generate good policy relevant research on healthy ageing, that can provide the essential evidence base for policy and program development for the future. (1.10)
- This review was commissioned by the Commonwealth Office for Older Australians on behalf of the Community Services Minister’s Advisory Council, to determine information needs for Commonwealth and State policy development in healthy ageing.(1.18)

Who needs information and why?

- Information collected through research on healthy ageing is required by a diverse range of stakeholders: government policy and program managers, service and provider organisations, advocacy organisations, consumers and the wider community. (2.1)
- Policy makers require information for developing and delivering cost-effective programs. (2.2)
- Provider organisations and formal care providers themselves need research findings and information relevant to their work. (2.4)
- Advocacy groups need information to guide individual and social action by older people. (2.6)
- The need for targeted information to be provided to older persons (of all ages) themselves is self-evident. (2.7)
- The increasing numbers and wealth of older people underscores the considerable potential for the private sector in responding to their demand for high quality life styles. (2.8)
- There is a need to ensure that sound scientific and verifiable information based on valid research findings is available to offset the more spurious claims that may be made for relatively expensive and potentially harmful products and procedures in certain circumstances. (2.10)
 - A number of broad themes emerged from the group consultations and telephone interviews.
 - The research topics need to be tackled from a multidisciplinary perspective that also includes input from older people.

- Healthy ageing research is not just about older people, but about the process of ageing across the adult lifespan and inter-generational relationships. We need to think of ageing people not older people.
- Promoting healthy ageing requires a better understanding of the psychological and social factors that impact on health.
- Many interventions are good for the whole community even when they are primarily targeted at older people.
- Many large data bases about older Australian people are available but have not been fully analysed or integrated (2.19)

Who provides research?

- The production of useful knowledge on healthy ageing depends on having a capable and responsive research community. Researchers can be influenced and enabled by incentives and resources that direct them towards useful studies and communicating findings to those who will apply them. (3.1)
- Of the various approaches to conducting healthy ageing research, the most common approach, based on the content analysis of the Australian Ageing Research Directories, is individuals or small group research in Universities, conducting specific investigations sometimes along with graduate students. (3.11)
- An alternative approach to research is provided by Centres that bring together researchers focused on a common mission. Australian States presently have varying small Centres concerned with healthy ageing and their research is generally well represented in the Australian Ageing Research Directory. (3.15)
- In addition to the University Centres specifically on ageing, it is important to take account of other University research concentrations doing related work of excellence. (3.17)
- Australia does not have any nationally funded research institute with a primary interest in healthy ageing. (3.18)
- Indications from the Research Directory (2000) suggest that funding of ‘healthy ageing’ research is broader than the contributions of the NHMRC and ARC, and that although these organizations are the major funding bodies, they provide only minimal support to healthy ageing research. (3.20)
- The majority of the research reported in the Australian Ageing Research Directory focuses on the ‘problems’ of old age and their management, although there is a growing interest in health promotion and successful ageing research. (3.26)
- There already are data sources related to health and ageing in Australia. These include Census data, national survey data, mortality and morbidity information, market research and program statistics. There is considerable potential for further analyses of these data sources with respect to healthy ageing. (3.29)

Ways ahead

- With foresight and planning, ageing can emerge as a massive opportunity rather than a problem.(4.1)
- A central question to be addressed will be how to assure the health and well being of the increasing proportion of older persons enjoying greater than ever life expectancy. (4.2)

- The value of sound knowledge to guide action is recognised by the strong emphasis given to research and information being considered in the development of the National Strategy for an Ageing Australia framework. (4.4)
- The opportunity is now here to develop a coordinated approach and commit resources to building a national research capacity on ageing. (4.5)
- There appears to be widespread agreement among policymakers, consumer groups, and researchers that more research and data collection is needed on healthy ageing. Consultation with researchers throughout Australia elicited a number of key factors limiting a comprehensive response to this need:
 - Most research on healthy ageing at present is conducted by individuals or small groups from the disciplines and/or areas of geriatric medicine, psychology, sociology, social policy and public health.
 - A number of small research centres conduct research on healthy ageing but their scope is limited, there is little synthesis or dissemination of knowledge, and there is little networking or coordination between them.
 - There are limited opportunities within the NHMRC, the ARC and other funding bodies to focus on healthy ageing research.(4.6)
- A more strategic approach is clearly needed to further develop health and social policy related research on ageing. (4.8)
- Dissemination is crucial to ensure that research findings and their implications are fully available to the appropriate audiences who can make use of it. (4. 12)
- Priority topics for research are presented in the areas of well-being, independence and activity; social and cultural diversity; improving and maintaining health; intergenerational relations and planning for ageing; income, employment and voluntary contributions; program and service research; and the baby boom and social change. (4.18)
- To be fully effective the organisational framework for a healthy ageing research strategy must reflect Australia's federal character and build on the collective strengths of the Commonwealth, States and Territories. (4.20)
- Researchers surveyed recommended four main ways in which ageing research in Australia could be improved:
 - creating a national institute on ageing;
 - a network of state institutes with a national institute as the coordinating focus;
 - the establishment of specific ageing funding bodies and/or specific purpose funding arrangements; and
 - increased funding for research training in the field of ageing including scholarships, training fellowships and postgraduate fellowships. (4.21)
- A strong case needs to be put to NHMRC and ARC to review the impacts of population ageing on the health of Australians and to devote some of its recent funding increases to this area. (4.26; 4.27)
- A comprehensive approach to healthy ageing research can be furthered significantly by a national focus for leadership. (4.30)
- A national institute and related state centres (see below) can better coordinate and enhance research on ageing by bringing more closely together the users and producers of research finding, and by facilitating communication and collaboration amongst them. (4.31)

- We recommend the establishment of a national task force with appropriate representation of key stakeholder groups to be charged within the framework of the National Strategy for an Ageing Australia and the Commonwealth State and Territory Strategy on Healthy Ageing to investigate the feasibility and propose a structure, organisation and funding sources for the Institute. (4.33)
- In our view a coherent research program on healthy ageing requires a network of at least one comprehensive multi-disciplinary centre devoted to healthy ageing within each of the five mainland states. (4.35)
- In the Australian Federal system, States provide the natural basis for establishing centers that relate closely to the State Government initiatives across the full scope of healthy ageing, and also bring together their multiple universities. (4.36)
- Major resources for understanding healthy ageing are longitudinal, multi-disciplinary surveys of ageing. Australia has notable studies in individual cities such as the Australian Longitudinal Study on Ageing in Adelaide, the Health Behaviours and Outcomes study in Melbourne, and the Dubbo study of ageing. Notwithstanding the valuable National Women's Longitudinal Health Survey, we lack the kind of comprehensive national survey that underpins ageing research in Europe and North America.(4.38)
- We recommend that the funding of longitudinal studies on ageing be explored as a core component of the ongoing partnerships between the proposed National Institute and State Centres on ageing. (4.43)
- A coherent national approach requires Commonwealth-State joint action with leadership through the Commonwealth Office for Older Australian, together with the parallel offices and/or units in each of the States. This will advance a national focus to coordination, priority setting and disbursement of dedicated ageing research funds to conduct research and disseminate findings on healthy ageing. (4.45)