



« Older people are important contributors to the economy » says Dr Dharam Bhugun

This week our invitee is Dr Dharam Bhugun, a Mauritian born specialist in psychosocial therapy, established in Australia since some 33 years. He has 20+ years of experience in helping people overcome mental health problems, domestic and family violence, relationship and family issues, and has been advocating for the rights of older people. He has a sharp analysis of the situation of older people affected by dementia and Alzheimer.

> Dr Bhugun, how do you define an elderly person? What is the place of elderly persons in the Australian society?

Technically, a person who is past middle age is referred to as an elderly person, for example people between the ages of 65 and 70. Researchers now point to new levels of longing for longevity, where 90 is the new 50. Older individuals who are physically, socially and economically active do not want to be regarded as elderly. Generally, the term elderly is often used to describe people who become quite fragile and require care. The way elderly people walk, talk; the food they eat; the clothes they wear; and the kind of sport and exercise they engage in may be perceived as 'elderly people's behaviour'. The community and family definition of an 'elderly person' is tagged with their social role, such as when their children become adults, they become grandparents, or retire from the workforce. Globally, an 'elderly person' is perceived as a title for respect inspired by their wisdom, talent and dignity as a person. In my view, an elderly person is more of who we are and how we feel than the age factor. It's not about whether someone else thinks of us as elderly, but whether we think of us as an elderly person.

In Australia, 17% of the total population is aged 65 and over. Australians are expected to live longer and healthier. The challenge therefore is to make sure that they continue to live healthy, happy, productive and connected. Older Australians have the wisdom and experience to continue to contribute to businesses, education and to the community. The Australian Government is committed to building systems and services that cater for the changing needs of the older population. The Government recognises the despair and confusion faced by dementia sufferers and their families, and thus provides more support for those with dementia and better access to information as the prevalence of dementia is growing, with the growth rate expected to peak between 2021 and 2030 as the baby boomers age.

> Very often older people are considered to be looking for rights while as a matter of fact they are rights owners: your comments.

Older people are rights owners



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because of their long and established ethical contributions to the economic, social and cultural fabric of the society and country they live in. While human rights are about everyone, they are more so for older people because of society's negative attitude towards them and consequential discrimination on the basis of age, marginalization and abuse.

> We are some 225,000 thousand older people in Mauritius, much is being written and said on their old age pension. Though pensioned, they are a great potential still in the economic development of the country. So we cannot write them off?

Society equates productivity and creativeness with employment and earning money. As people are living longer, healthier lives, their voluntary participation to share their skills and life experiences in the community and workforce is a great potential for economic development of the country. Older people are important contributors to the economy through their continued engagement in post-retirement, through their incomes and assets. Most old age pensioners are respected for their wisdom, integrity, and human capital, which the society at large will benefit from if we give them the chance. In fact, many older people become very creative after retirement, and volunteer in many social and community organisations. Most pensioners are still doing some form of work or other for personal and family economic gains. One important economic contribution of elderly people that goes often unnoticed is the provision of unpaid care to elderly,



Dr Dharam Bhugun.

handicapped, neglected children, and child care as most parents and single parents work these days. All levels of Government need to capitalize on these demographic and societal shifts by creating policies that reduce the prevalence of age discrimination.

> On one side we have the cult of the youth and on the other many develop negative attitudes towards older people. What should we do to address this ageist attitude?

Ageism is embedded in historical social narratives that values youth more than elderly people. This belief has been exacerbated by media propaganda that young is 'good', old is 'bad'. Intervention strategies such as educating professionals and the general public, and intergenerational engagement can help reduce ageism. The youth, school-aged children and university students need to contact and spend more time with elderly people, and engage more with their grandparents. Information about ageing should be promoted in schools and community hubs. We should evaluate our own bias about aging, be open to new ideas and eliminate our own judgements about ageing. On the other hand, the world elderly population is increasing significantly, thus exposing the youth to more elderly people.

> As a specialist in the field, how do we prepare ourselves sensing either a dementia or an Alzheimer

case in our family?

'Dementia' describes a group of symptoms caused by different diseases. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. We need to observe situations such as memory loss, confusion, getting lost in previously normal situations, personality changes such as agitation, stubbornness and in some cases aggressive behaviours, and changes in physical motor skills such as repetitive speech and behaviours, wandering, lack of appetite and sleep disturbance. Caring for someone with dementia can negatively impact on the carer's physical and mental health as well. Carers need to increase their knowledge of the condition, both from a caring and biological lens.

> People live longer. It's an indication they are more conscious of their diet, physical fitness and hygiene. Could you explain why there are depressions in people who live "too long"?

People who live too long are only happy if they are healthy. Once their health deteriorates and modern medicine try to make them live longer for the dollar and nothing else, or family members keep them alive until "God takes them away", they become unhappy, resentful and hate to see themselves or be seen in that dependent, vegetative and undignified state. Some people become sad from being isolated. Self-pity becomes the main cause of depression.

> How should we go about safeguarding the mental and physical well-being of older people?

Healthy ageing involves good physical, mental and social well-being. A small amount of exercise every day for at least 15-30 minutes improves your energy level and mood. Staying mentally active helps to maintain cognitive functioning, mental well-being, and promotes independence. It is important for older people to engage in continued learning such as part-time educational courses, part-time employment, reading books, writing, doing puzzles, social activities with people outside the household at least once a week, shopping tours, and engage in community groups, sports, societies and volunteering.

Interview conducted by
Vijay Naraidoo