

Old Age in Australia, You're Living It...

I loved the quirky 1980's ABC tv sketch "Australia You're Standing in It" and when, now in my seventy seventh year, I say to myself "Old Age, You're Living It", I try to approach the idea in the spirit of that series — together with a touch of the ridiculous.

Growing old in Australia is going through a period of change, from something that was hardly discussed 50 years ago, to an issue that is constantly debated in the press, that is the subject of a Royal Commission, that is on the lips of, not only the elderly, but also on the agenda of their children, their communities, their government, their medical care providers.

Having woken in fright to the fact that I'm old, I'm actually involved in planning for the remainder of my days here on planet earth, in as many ways as I can control. Compared to my parents (who would be 118 and 124 years if they were still here) I have many options and decisions worth considering to help me best enjoy the time that remains to me. This includes : whether to remain in my home.

whether to write an advanced aged care directive, letting my medical professionals in on my wishes as my health declines, and

whether to engage in the recent debate about "dying with dignity", now part of the law in some State legislations.

Take the first of these three questions asked of the ageing person.
"As I get older can I get the help I need to remain in my home, where I am at ease with all that is familiar? "

According to the online site, My Aged Care, this should be possible for many Australians when they sign up to one of the Aged Care Providers to take over the administration of some of their needs. These needs might be doctors visits, help with domestic chores, administering medication, shopping, or altering the home itself to better accomodate the frailler physical person. This assistance might morph into more serious services — doctors visits, visits from other health professionals, physiotherapists, podiatrists, psychologists.... Of course all this comes at a cost, and on application one is accessed and means tested. And then there is the overall administration fee. So we oldies need to be savvy about when and how to commit to such a scheme.

Whether or not to stay in my own home is only the first aspect of ageing that I'm considering. Earlier generations didn't necessarily have the same choice. When my parents reached the stage that I'm at, these government initiatives were not in place. My father died young. (I didn't think so at the time, he was 76, but now that I've passed his innings I'm thinking he died VERY young). My mother was gathered up by her children, there were four of us, and her elder daughter moved her into a flat near where she lived. This was made possible by selling the family home, and having the four children contribute in whatever ways they could manage, not necessarily in money terms. Was this the Australian way at the time? I don't know , but I was conscious that our "new Australian" neighbours did things differently. I'm thinking of the Italians and the Greeks. I'd noticed as a young person the way the generations of their families seemed to merge, blend, swap roles, as family members prospered or declined. And that, for the most part, the ancients were revered.

For almost 50 years I have been visiting the Greek island of Corfu, always holidaying in the same village, Agios Stefanos. I have watched three generations of the same family experience the various stages of life. Nichos who was a baby in the 1970s is now the taverna owner and de facto mayor of the village. At lunchtime on a Sunday you will

find his 92 year old father, Costas with his cronies, seated at the table of honour in the taverna. They have been to church and are being feted by his successful son. This happens all Sundays even when the taverna is graced by the British royals and the powerful Rothschild family. In the village I observe true acknowledgment of, and gratitude towards, the older generation. Nichos is similarly proud of the younger generation . A photo of his handsome son, Constantine, — a veritable Adonis — in naval uniform because he is away on National Service, takes a prominent place near the till.

Back to me in Australia. I have decided to stay in a relatively suitable small house I built 16 years ago, with my decline in mind. At this stage I won't join the government initiative, but will organize the help I need myself. Likewise any alterations to the structure of my home, to make it more elder friendly. Doubtless as my health declines I'll think again about the sense of committing to a scheme.

Now to speak of the second big change to those of us living as Aged Australians. — We are the first generation empowered to shout out loud about what medical treatment, or withholding of treatment , we want in our final years. This we can orchestrate through various Aged Care Directives. These directives range from a document with the standing of a legal imperative to a softer version that is simply a statement of the old person's wishes. The more prescriptive version would be viewed and noted each time the person had a hospital procedure or operation. All versions include a statement of what treatment, or withholding of treatment, the old person would want in various circumstances — an accident, a deterioration of the mind.....this document to be shared by, and circulated among, the kin and intimates of the old person and the medical professionals, expecting that, in their knowledge of the old persons wishes, they will act accordingly.

As these directives have become one of the ways to be old in Australia, I have really put an effort into saying how I want to be treated at the end of life. One might

as well! Dying is just as much part of life as living is.....

Many GP practices have health professionals dedicated to helping the old person express his wishes, either formally binding or simply expressed as desires. When I arrived at the end of my wish list I thought I might as well continue on, to my send-off after I've died. This was actually fun — almost ruling from the grave, something that's not supposed to be possible.... I chose the service, the hymns, a preference for burial, a suggestion for the wake. Then I really went to town to ask for something that seems to be completely out of vogue. It is important to me that the casket that houses my body be carried shoulder high, not like a handbag or wheeled along.

I did not realize that this is not common practice until my sister died three years ago and I requested that she be borne aloft in this way. I went with my nephew to make her funeral arrangements. I sat quietly not offering suggestions until the end when I requested that she be carried shoulder high, triumphantly, an acknowledgement of a remarkable woman and a life well lived — a victory procession. The undertaker obviously thought "here's trouble" and started talking about health and safety issues for his staff. He continued on about back problems and the weight of floral tributes on top of the weight of the coffin and body. I'm afraid I stood my ground assuring him that there were many strapping family members, able for the job. I have of course inserted this instruction in my own funeral wishes as a post script to my Aged Care Directive.

A copy of a persons Directive is held with his medical records, and it can also be circulated to anyone else with an interest, usually next of kin and family members. In my case my five children. Their reactions on receiving the document were all as different from one another's as are their personalities. In no particular order

Gotcha!

Is there something about your health at the moment you're not telling me?

Ma, it's Brahms Cello Sonatas, not Brahms Cello Concertos.

Whatever you say, Mum...

Darling Mum, you're going to live for ages and ages more...

The third aspect of being old in Australia that is on my mind centres around the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act. This year a Bendigo woman, Kerry Robertson, became the first Victorian to be granted a permit under the Act, and the first person to use such a permit. She and her family were of one mind about using the assisted dying process, and the newspaper reports informed us that every aspect of the process worked exactly as they had hoped and expected, and that Kerry Robertson's death was peaceful and beautiful. Not all families would necessarily be of one mind about using this legislation to achieve a death, in fact I can imagine it as a source of friction in some circumstances — something that would divide rather than unite a family.

Most Australians will have had a conversation over the last two years about assisted dying, especially those of mature years. Certainly it's a topic of conversation in my group of friends, sometimes just coming up in a chat over coffee, sometimes more formally, say, at bookclub, where it might be the subject of a book we are discussing. Everyone has a different opinion on the Act's merits, and often opinions differ dramatically . I'm glad the Act is restricted to those " who face an inevitable imminent death as a result of an incurable disease, illness or medical decision". I know too many old people, mainly women, who feel that they are somehow letting down their families by not dying — that in fact by living on they are cheating their children of an inheritance, or that they are a nuisance, preventing others from getting on with their lives.

I'm not one of these self sacrificing types. I've had the privilege of witnessing the deaths of various people close to me, who have spent theirs last days in palliative care, a practice in which I have a lot of faith.

We all see life and death differently , and one of the most powerful novels I have read on the subject of living and dying is Margaret Drabble's The Dark Flood Rises. It

is a brilliant novel of our times describing our concerns over climate change and contemporary attitudes towards ageing. All the characters have a different attitude towards dying, which makes it the perfect work to read to start a discussion on the subject.

At the moment Australia has a Royal Commission enquiring into Aged Care and Safety. After years of general anxiety about the state of Aged Care in nursing homes, an ABC 4Corners programme revealed just how dire the conditions in many homes are. This revelation pushed the government into action, calling for a Royal Commission which commenced in October 2018. Next month, October 2019, we are due for an interim report. With the Royal Commission underway, suddenly everything about Aged Care seems newsworthy . This making the public aware of the conditions under which old people live can only be helpful in improving their lot. I, for one, am grateful for this enormous expose, and hopeful of a better life because of it. Just this week I can give you four examples of Aged Care in the news.

1. Bupa Aged Care Homes.

The 7.30 Report uncovered information demonstrating that 50 % of Bupa Care Homes across Australia have failed to measure up to Australian standards of basic care. Bupa has apologised for these failures and must be working flat out trying to redeem its reputation and repair its breaches of the rules.

2. Opportunities for young people to train as carers.

On September 13th the ABC breakfast show ran a segment about a new training scheme to attract young people to work in the Aged Care sector. The story centred around the fact that working in Aged Care is one of the fastest growing areas of employment, as the population now includes more oldies than ever, and that the current average of the carers is 50+ years. As these workers age further, it suggested they would be leaving the industry to join it as clients! So it was presented as an employment opportunity for the young.

3. Dementia.

As expected most news items about Aged Care Will have some mention of Dementia, either Alzheimer's disease, or the more general dementia associated with ageing. Today, October 14th, it was Radio National's turn to showcase the condition during the "God Forbid" programme. It suggested that in 40 years time there will be 6 million Australians living with dementia. The lively discussion threw up an interesting idea. Much money has been spent on research, looking for a cure, so far unsuccessfully. Instead the suggestion was to put more money into the care of sufferers, who currently have very rushed attention, most Care Homes being chronically understaffed.

4. "Old People's Home for 4 year Olds"

While not a news report this delightful ABC series has charmed many viewers. Who would have thought that the simple premise of putting together the young and the ancients would make such wonderful television viewing. But I should not have been so sceptical. It has all the elements of a good show. Suspension: Will Eric squeeze the duckling to death? Will an oldie loose his cool and smack a little person?Fear: Will an ancient fall over or even pop off? Love: very many instances of love have developed over the episodes.

Musing on the quirky charm of "Old Peoples Home for 4 year Olds" might be a good place to leave this writing, in an upbeat frame of mind. It is too easy to be downcast by reading about conditions in nursing homes, by feeling that youth hates us because we steal from them if we accept franking credits , or because we're living longer and staying at work longer when they could have our jobs. We oldies could instead all calm down a little, avoid some of the reporting that upsets us. After all we are no longer the news makers, and are not going to be examined on the day's events. It could even be time to add smelling the roses to our agenda.

