Positive signs in age debate

"How to age healthily is something we would all do well to think about"
Professor Jan Potter

In Australia, the population is ageing faster than it ever has before. Of course, we are not getting older any faster than our parents or grandparents did…but the proportion of the population over the age of 65 is higher than it has ever been before and this proportion is growing.

What is more disturbing is that the number of elderly people with cognitive impairment – problems with mental functioning – is growing steadily. And in the Illawarra, we are facing an uphill battle to attract and retain enough doctors and other health professionals qualified to care for these people.

Unfortunately, we tend to think of ageing negatively; likewise for aged care facilities. But there is a lot we can do as a society to improve the situation.

One thing that is critically important is research in the field of healthy ageing. We can use research to evaluate our existing healthcare system, to develop new interventions, to work out how to prevent certain illnesses and encourage people to take the action needed to protect their health.

One example of such research is a new collaboration between the Area Health Service, University of Wollongong and local residential aged care facilities. The project, coordinated by the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI), is called ‘REACH out in dementia – Recognise End of life And Care Holistically’ and will provide much needed training and resources for staff who care for people with late stage dementia.

But what can each of us do personally, to try to age as healthily as possible?

Eating well to make sure we maintain a good nutritional state and body weight is vital, especially as we age. Vitamins can play an important role where there are nutritional deficiencies. For example, we now know that many older people are deficient in Vitamin D, needed by the body for the absorption of calcium. Although our skin can manufacture Vitamin D when exposed to sunlight, most older people are deficient for a variety of reasons and may need oral replacement.

Exercise and balance classes have also been proven to improve health and wellbeing in older people. Importantly, regular exercise can help reduce the likelihood of falls, which are a very common cause of injury among the elderly and a major reason for admission to nursing homes. Often there is a simple and treatable reason for a fall occurring, suggesting many falls are preventable.

While we should aim to prevent institutional care where possible, realistically there will be a growing need for aged care facilities. My vision for the facilities of the future is one in which all food is nutritionally suited and appealingly presented, exercise and balance classes are run daily, and adequate numbers of medical and health professionals work together on site with enthusiasm and expertise in aged care. While we already have some wonderful facilities, we will need many more of them.

Here in the Illawarra, I hope to see continued work by the Area Health Service and University strengthen our aged care services and allow us to attract and retain aged care experts in all aspects of health. Let’s become a centre not just with a record expansion in elderly people, but with a record expansion in experts to care for them! Perhaps we are a long way off this ideal, but I believe it is something we can work towards.

In the meantime, we would all do well to think about what we can each do as individuals to age healthily.

Clinical Professor Jan Potter is medical director of the ‘healthy ageing’ theme of the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI), and clinical director of the aged care, community health and chronic care stream for the Southern Hospitals’ Network.