

# Seniors *are assets*

BY ELEANOR YAP



Debunking the myths of seniors and paying tribute to their expertise and experiences was what the NUS and UWAS symposium managed to do

It is ironic that at a recent symposium on positive ageing titled “Golden Years – Glorious Years”, it did not take much convincing when you took a closer look at the audience and panel. It read more like a “Who’s Who of Active Seniors”! There were two active octogenarians sitting on the panel – Harry Chan, who is a founder chairperson of the NUS (National University of Singapore Society) Senior Circle and serves on the NUS Alumni Advisory Board, and Dr Ann Wee, a part-time professor at NUS, and a current member of the Panel of Advisors to the Juvenile Court and the Tribunal for the Maintenance of Parents.

Also, on the panel were Dr Chiang Hai Ding (above, left), who recently opened his Centre For Seniors (CFS); Assoc Prof Kalyani Mehta (above, right), grandmother-of-two and said to be the oldest of the current NMPs; ex-NMP Assoc

Prof Ngiam Tee Liang, head of the Department of Social Work at NUS; Dr Kanwaljit Soin, a consultant orthopaedic and hand surgeon in private practice and chair of WINGS (Women’s Initiative for Ageing Successfully) and let’s not forget, Dr Francis Pavri (below with Dr Rosemary Khoo), a SMU (Singapore Management University) adjunct business professor and NUS Senior Circle chairperson, who recently got lost on the 1,010 m-tall Gunung Belumut in Kluang, Johor, for 12 hours when he had gone hiking with six other colleagues.

The audience also did not disappoint us with just as many active seniors – like Constance Singam, current president of AWARE (Association of Women for Action & Research) and a respected social activist and writer. Her latest venture is a café serving up Indian and Western cuisine.



And then, there was ex-NTUC Income CEO Tan Kin Lian, chairperson of CFS, and a proud blogger; founder/first chairperson of the Disabled Peoples' International Ron Chandran-Dudley and chairman/CEO of Modern Montessori International Dr T Chandroo; and advocate and solicitor and current NUSS president, Chandra Mohan K Nair. There was also representation from the senior organisations including CEO of the Singapore Action Group of Elders (SAGE) KT Phua, Retired & Senior Volunteer Programme (Singapore) (RSVP) president Dr Philbert Chin, and Gerontological Society (Singapore) (GSS) president Laurence Wee, who is also a board member of CFS.

Seeing the audience, it would be a misnomer to assume the older generation are useless and do not contribute to society. "There are deep-seated prejudices or views of an ageing person – they being slow and not sharp. We have a long way to go to overcome these wrong perceptions of those who are older," said Minister Lim Boon Heng, the guest-of-honour, during the symposium.

According to statistics, Singapore's growing seniors will become a force to reckon with – they spent an estimated US\$1.2 billion (S\$1.82 billion) on dining, entertainment and shopping last year, and US\$300 million (S\$454.5 million) on travel and leisure. According to a news report, it is estimated that they will spend three times as much as youth consumers in the next 10 years. Their presence will also be felt in the way they contribute to society and forever changing what one would view an older person. They indeed remain as human capital in more ways than one.

"We eschew ageism in any form, and strongly advocate measures and means that will override and dispel the pervasive stereotyping of ageing people," said ex-retired professor, Dr Rosemary Khoo, president of the University Women's Association (Singapore) (UWAS) and co-organiser of the symposium with NUSS, during her address. "What we wish to see fostered is a celebration of age where seniors are an invaluable resource for the betterment of society – a ballast for its social and cultural strength, a repository of wisdom that can be tapped."

### Seniors as human capital

WINGS' Dr Soin also further debunked the way seniors are depicted in the media in her talk titled

"Does longevity, health & population ageing generate wealth?" in the first panel on seniors as human capital. "Over 65, they are depicted with a stick!" She added that longevity was a scarce commodity in the early years but today, the health status of the older generation is improving and resulting in them living longer. "Today, there are 10% of Singaporeans over the age of 65. In 2030, there will be 20% who are over 65. [Compare this to] year 1900 when there was less than 3% of the population over 65 years of age."

Not disappointing the audience with her dry humour, she continued, "Those who live by the crystal ball will die eating glass!" Dr Soin hammered that when Singapore talks about the GDP going up, "some of it is because of us, the older generation! We also are the ones who pass our assets to the young."

She added that healthy older persons are more likely to continue to work for wages or do volunteer work. "Longevity can be a source of human capital if we invest in people's health throughout their life course." In his talk "Seniors as national assets", Ngiam Tong Yuen, first vice-president of RSVP, agreed that seniors today are better educated as well as healthier than their parents and grandparents. "Businesses would be foolish to ignore the silver industry." He emphasised seniors' experience and expertise, and related it back to his volunteer-based organisation and its programmes, and how seniors are contributing to society.

Ngiam noted in particular the Mentoring programme where seniors impart values such as teamwork and honesty to disadvantaged children, and Cyberguide where IT and

computer-literate seniors help those who are not-so-literate (RSVP has trained 7,000 seniors to date). Debunking further the myth that seniors are not computer-savvy, he said, "They are no longer afraid of the computer. They know that the computer will not blow up when they press the wrong button!"

He also highlighted RSVP's ProGuide, a social enterprise programme, where seniors serve as consultants at various companies and get paid for their services. "The benefits of volunteering goes beyond just the giver but also to those who receive," said Ngiam. He said that RSVP has 800 members with half of them regularly active. "We need to create groups like us."



**"Someone in his 60s who complains he is too old to learn may not have learned much even when he was in his 20s!"**

— Dr Ann Wee



*NUISS Senior Circle members with NUISS president Chandra Mohan K Nair and Minister Lim Boon Heng.*



*The ladies behind the University Women's Association (Singapore).*



*Chandra Mohan K Nair of NUISS with Dr Khoo.*

He added that there should be a national plan for senior volunteers that emphasises “every senior is of value”. “If we [seniors] do more, we should be considered national assets. And we have the assets to make it happen.”

Concluded NMP Assoc Prof Mehta as she summarised everyone’s talks, “An ageing population does not spell doom and gloom ... an ageing society is an asset!”

### Lifelong learning

In the second panel on lifelong learning, CFS’ Dr Chiang spoke in his talk on “Learning and keeping active after retirement” that when he was faced

with retirement at 60, he did not take it easy as one would think but went and got a diploma in gerontology in Canada, where he remarked, “I was older than my professors!”

He commented that there are few voluntary welfare organisations that engage those who are in the third age or rather, those who remain active. Dr Chiang brought up CFS and its goal of employment guidance, as well as Tsao Foundation’s Guided Autobiography (GAB) programme where seniors can reflect on their pasts during workshops. He added, “Seniors who continue to learn ... do not become bored or depressed and have glorious years.”

NUS’ Dr Wee in her talk titled “Learning as lifestyle” gave a further scolding to the media that they continue to view the older generation in poor light and unfairly. “We see the older generation who are in their 60s viewed as sitting in a rocking chair or using a walking cane.”

She added: “Someone in his 60s who complains he is too old to learn may not have learned much even when he was in his 20s!” She also raised the idea of writing one’s family history, which she noted can be an interesting endeavour. “We should all be doing that.”

To end the talks, Wong Peng Meng, associate director of NUS Extension, gave his talk on “Lifelong learning: The NUS perspective” and detailed lifelong learning courses in languages as well as personal enrichment courses that seniors can take such as history and culture, writing, literature and traditional Chinese medicine. NUISS’ Dr Pavri highlighted that seniors should be allowed to take “whatever courses” that are offered to undergraduates as well, but Wong responded that priority should still be given to the undergraduates as they pay regular course fees.

On that note, NUISS’ Chan noted his quest to have an Academy of Lifelong Learning, which he said is “still a dream and something I am working on”.

The symposium ended on a high note with insight and productive comments, and an agreement that seniors will continue to make a mark ... not just in the audience! Seniors continue to evolve and they are not the same as five years ago. Said Minister Lim, “There are many myths about ageing. One of them is: ‘The lights may be on, but the voltage is low!’” Noting some members of the audience including NUISS’ Dr Pavri and co-chair Dr Khoo, and Chan, Lim said, “Far from low voltage, we have today floodlights in the room!” **!**

## Ministerial Committee for Ageing Issues

A Ministerial Committee On Ageing was set up early this year to tackle Singapore's ageing issues. Its chairman is Minister Lim Boon Heng of the Prime Minister's Office, who is also adviser to the Centre for Seniors. Other members of the committee include: Minister Khaw Boon Wan of Ministry of Health (MOH), Dr Vivian Balakrishnan and Yu-Foo Yee Shoon of Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Lim Swee Say of NTUC, Minister Heng Chee How of MOH and NTUC, Gan Kim Yong of Ministry of Manpower, Grace Fu and Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman of Ministry of National Development, and S Iswaran of Ministry of Trade and Industry. "We will build on what has been done before by other committees . . . Many of the recommendations have been implemented, or are being implemented. We will also learn from other countries which are ahead of us in the ageing curve," said Minister Lim. The focus will not only be on the family but also getting people to help themselves. "Government should be unobtrusive as possible. It should help seniors to be self-reliant and independent." The committee has adopted four strategic thrusts:

- 1) **Enhance employability and financial security** – "The sensible way forward is continued employment. Everyone should work for as long as he can, and as long as he wants. It need not be in the same job, for the same hours or for the same pay. We should stop using the term 'retirement'."
- 2) **Enable ageing-in-place** – This includes barrier-free accessibility of the built environment and public transport system, as well as putting in place essential services for the elderly to age-in-place in the community, going about their lives independently.
- 3) **Provide holistic and affordable healthcare and eldercare** – This involves ensuring that seniors in need of care have access to a seamless continuum of healthcare and eldercare services catering to different needs and means of seniors. "The healthcare financing system, the so-called 3Ms of Medisave, Medishield and Medifund, is being modified and re-shaped to give people greater ease of mind," said Minister Lim.
- 4) **Promote active ageing** – This involves encouraging seniors to age successfully by maintaining physical and mental well-being and continuing to contribute to society.

“There needs a lot of education that there is no such thing as retirement. In some countries, there is already a movement towards the concept of a 'no retirement age'. This will certainly eliminate in people's minds that there is a thing called retirement. We will not need conferences like this and the Council of Third Age or C3A will be out of a job, which is what you should be working towards. People should just continue working and if they want to stop, then they find whatever they want to do.”

– Dr Francis Paori, NUISS Senior Circle chairperson

“Could we have a concept of a transition sabbatical where people can get a longer break to do the things they long to do like visiting their sister in California or do bird watching in Borneo? This is particularly applicable to those who can stay in their jobs longer. But recognise that once they have done those things, they may have regrets having done those things!”

– Dr Ann Wee, part-time professor at NUS

“We have three boxes – you study, work and then you retire. We need to get away from this three-box syndrome. One should, in mid-life and especially in the later phases of one's life, alternate between work and study (with sufficient leisure) or when coming back to work not having to do the full gamut of 40 to 60 hours a week ... We really need to think what life-work balance should be all about. It should be the norm.”

– Harry Chan, founder chairperson of NUISS Senior Circle

“I hope your Council will not forget that there are seniors that cannot work. For us who are now active, there will come a time when we have difficulty getting out of our houses and driving. I hope you will then project and take it on your Council to think of not only putting seniors back into work but looking after seniors who really cannot work and don't wait until we are 80 to prepare for the people who need that help.”

– Dr Seet Ai Mee, ex-acting minister for Ministry of Community Development and Sports

“A retirement village has to have a medical facility. It is unviable if that facility only depends purely on the residents. If it was next to a community hospital or polyclinic, it can work. The F&B facilities in a retirement village will also not be viable if catered only for the residents so it needs to cater to a wider market. So for the upper-middle income Singaporeans, I believe the location in the HDB heartlands is the way to go ...”

– Minister Lim Boon Heng (Prime Minister's Office)

“I am perturbed by us trying to find terms for being old, only the lucky grow old and if you are not lucky, you die! ... The young don't complain about being called young but why should the old? ... The old have wisdom, experience ... the young should be proud to be old!”

– Dr Kanwaljit Soin, chair of WINGS (Women's Initiative for Ageing Successfully) and consultant orthopaedic and hand surgeon