

Hal Kendig, Ageing Work and Health Research Unit, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney

The draft report of the Productivity Commission (PC) *Review of Care for Older People* <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/aged-care/draft> makes fundamentally important recommendations for reforming aged care (<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/croakey/2011/02/01/the-aged-care-sector-should-throw-its-weight-behind-reform-recommendations-says-expert/>?).

The report includes a chapter on Aged Care Policy Research and Evaluation that recognises the value of applied research and suggests some useful improvements. It emphasises the importance of data for developing a more consumer-focused aged care system and supporting ongoing policy development and evaluation. Yet this important beginning falls short of making fully effective recommendations. Where is the recommendation for purposeful and adequately funded research and evaluation programs that would genuinely inform the development of a ‘smarter’, more effective, more equitable, and more efficient system of care and support for older people?

The PC’s report (p436) quotes from the Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) ‘... building a robust evidence-base is an essential foundation upon which to develop ageing and aged care policies and reforms to best meet the challenges and opportunities of an ageing Australian population’ (p436 in the Review).

http://www.aag.asn.au/filelib/AAG_Submission_-_Caring_for_Older_Australians.pdf The chapter acknowledges the value of earlier applied research funding, including the NHMRC/ARC research program in Ageing Well/Ageing Productively (2005-2010), and important work by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. It recommends that the proposed Australian Aged Care Regulation Commission should have the primary responsibility for national data sets. This should provide a measure of independence from the operational management and funding of aged care.

The PC recommendations

The primary focus of the PC recommendations is on practical ways to make better use of routinely collected aged care data by increasing data consistency, linkage, availability, and coordination. They make a strong case for developing more outcome-based data, and improving transparency and independence in research and evaluation. This is important because – apart from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - much of the publicly-funded work at present is not released for wider use in the public interest to improve aged care services.

Drawing largely from public submissions and the earlier National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission 2009, recommendations are presented for:

- A data clearinghouse for aged care that would improve, store, and importantly make available data from agency operational statistics.

- Building a better evidence base including research on the needs of older people and the demand for aged care services and on the cost-effectiveness of prevention and early intervention.
- Better understanding the cost-effectiveness of care in the community and in residential care.
- Better understanding the relationships between aged care and other health and welfare services, and the flow of older people through health and care systems over time.
- Using trials and pilot programs with evaluation and follow-through to find out what works (or not) and why.

The recommendations are valuable and worthy of support.

The PC on Research Capacity

The PC report briefly reviews applied research developments in ageing, noting that the NHMRC Ageing Well, Ageing Productively Research Program (2005-2010) and the ARC/NHMRC Research Network in Ageing Well (also 2005-2010) have both concluded. It mentions small research centres in Australian Universities, as well as the newly established ARC Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research (CEPAR) (2011-2017). It mentions the continuing National Research Priority on Ageing Well, Ageing Productively, and my recommendation for a national Aged Care and Support Research Program modelled on the very successful Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI).

The PC does not consider limitations in the resources devoted to ageing research. National cornerstones of information over the past decade - the Ageing and Aged Care Unit in the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) – have had budget cuts over recent years. The relatively well-funded AWAP research program did not fund any research in its designated area of ‘Approaches to Care’. Mainstream ARC and NHMRC research programs – which make funding decisions on the primary criterion of international research excellence rather than national importance for Australia – fund some care-related research notably through the ARC Linkages and NHMRC partnership programs and some NHMRC Health Services and project grants. But they are few and far between and not strategically focussed on developing and improving care and support. The Commonwealth *Building Ageing Research Capacities* initiative was promising but it did not have any fellowships, scholarships, or skill development and it was disbanded a few years ago.

Where are we now?

We are fortunate in having a strong basis for developing a purposeful research agenda if government chooses to support it. At a broad strategic level the Department of Health and Ageing and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2003) established the *Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda* as part of the Building Ageing Research

Capacities Initiative. The Framework included a priority for research addressing the goal ‘Providing accessible, appropriate, high quality health and aged care’ as per the National Strategy for an Ageing Australia 2001. Our thinking has progressed considerably over recent years:

- Aged and Community Services Australia, The Australian Association of Gerontology, and the ARC Research Network in Ageing Well (2010) produced the *Community Care Research Agenda* based on a rigorous consultation and priority setting process. http://www.aag.asn.au/community_care_research_agenda.php. The Agenda addresses topics central to the implementation and delivery of the PC Report recommendation for the benefit of older people and carers.
- The ARC/NHMRC Research Network in Ageing Well – in collaboration with the AAG – produced the *Ageing Research Challenge for Australia* (2008) including priority topics central to evidence-based development of health and care systems, prevention and maintaining independence, evaluation, and testing ideas for reform.
- The Network and collaborators produced *Guidelines for Involving Older People in Community-based Research* and recommendations for conducting consultancies www.ageingwell.edu.au
- The Emerging Researchers in Ageing (ERA) Program led by Monash University is very valuable for graduate students with funding moving from the Network to the new ARC CEPAR Centre.

There have been some promising research developments but they remain limited particularly in informing service and practice developments. AWAP program grants focus on prevention and Aboriginal health but none were funded in the area identified as ‘Approaches to Care Supporting Independence’. The valuable Dementia Collaborative Research Centres inform prevention, practice, and service delivery for people with dementia but comparable research is scarce for other older people who need care. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute has produced valuable research on accommodation and care directly relevant to the PC Recommendations. The Australian Longitudinal Survey of Women’s Health (ALSWH), funded by Health and Ageing, works closely with the Department in producing policy-relevant findings. On occasion small scale, innovative research has been funded by other agencies such as the Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council, State HACC programs, and foundations and trusts.

Commonwealth support for research and evaluations, however, has fallen to levels far below those that proved to be very valuable in developing and implementing the community and residential care reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. Consultancy reports are seldom released into the public domain where they could inform service improvements. In the 1990s the Department’s applied Health Services Research and Development Grants program – which supported valuable applied research in developing the 1980s reforms – was absorbed into the NHMRC with little subsequent work in aged care. The NHMRC had a small ageing research theme in the early 2000s but it was disbanded.

Directions

The Productivity Commission Report provides a valuable framework for evaluation and research that can inform the cost-effective development and ongoing delivery of the next historic stage in caring for older people in Australia. The PC recommendations should be strongly supported when the report is launched midyear. And we need to go much further; it is hoped that the draft report will be strengthened with the following:

- 1) That the Commonwealth Government establish a well-resourced Aged Care and Support Research Program building on the *Community Care Research Agenda 2010*, the *Ageing Research Challenge for Australia 2008*, and deep consultation with older people, carers, and service providers. The program must have a strong emphasis on translation, dissemination, and accountability.
- 2) That the Commonwealth strengthen its leadership in research and analysis through strategic investment in the AIHW, ABS, Assessment and other data bases, evidence – based practise, and consultancies and evaluations.
- 3) That the NHMRC and ARC be urged to develop a second and then ongoing rounds of the valuable Ageing Well, Ageing Productively Program grants, including a specific focus on research concerning aged care and support.
- 4) That the NHMRC develop a targeted funding strategy focused on ageing and care in line with the priority afforded it in its current strategic plan.
- 5) That the Encouraging Best Practice in Residential Aged Care (EBPRAC) program be developed with funding to support research (as well as translation) and expanded to cover community care.
<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ageing-bestpractice-program-ebprac.htm>

In summary, research and evaluation are critical for identifying the support and care needs of frail older people and their carers, and for informing ways of increasing the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of services and other actions on their behalf. This knowledge foundation is essential for advancing independence, care and support for older Australians now and for their increasing numbers over the decades ahead.

Note: I wish to thank Gill Lewin, Julie Byles, and Lynne Parkinson for their comments but the responsibility rests with me.