



The Royal New Zealand
College of General Practitioners
Te Whare Tohu Rata o Aotearoa

150
years

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Tēnā koe, Jemima

RNZCGP Submission on Unlocking the potential of active ageing

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the consultation for unlocking the potential of active ageing.

The Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners (the College) is the largest medical college in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our membership of 6,439 specialist GPs and rural hospital doctors comprises 40 percent of Aotearoa New Zealand's specialist medical workforce. The Medical Council of New Zealand accredits the College to deliver vocational training to the specialist General Practitioner and Rural Hospital Doctor workforce. The College is committed to prioritising the reduction of health inequities experienced by Māori and honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Māori rights enshrined within. To do this we prioritise initiatives that support our members to develop cultural safety capabilities through our Training, Continuing Professional Development and Quality programmes.¹

Our members provide medical care in the community with 23 million¹ patient contacts recorded in 2023 showing the combined efforts of 1,077 general practice clinical teams providing first point of contact care and effectively managing 90 percent of health concerns for whānau in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Our submission

The College believes active ageing is a preventative health initiative and one that is important for the wellbeing of older people in Aotearoa. To support active ageing, the best approach is to ensure that health policy is designed with accessibility and health as key priorities. Healthcare needs of older adults in New Zealand are complex, as this demographic often faces a range of health challenges that require specialised care. Chronic conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, and cognitive impairments like dementia, are prevalent among older adults. Additionally, many older New Zealanders struggle with mobility issues and sensory impairments.ⁱ

Prioritising health and wellness entail a focus on healthcare throughout a person's life course. Education on the benefits of healthy lifestyles is proven to drastically improve health in their later years.ⁱⁱ The benefits of regular exercise, a balanced diet and mental health need to be promoted in education and in workplaces. Conversely, information on the harms of lifestyle choices should also be easily accessible. This includes harms from alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, inactivity, as well as from social factors such as pollution and poor housing.^{iii iv}

Prioritising accessibility includes all environments from the home, workplaces, local facilities, and transport. In these areas, thought needs to be given to physical ability and accessibility to manage movement, and to eyesight and hearing as important considerations. This could range from ensuring ramps or elevators are available at businesses and workplaces, signage is readable, public transport is easy to navigate, and communication technology used in these environments is clear and subtitled.

Our reasons to support active ageing

Taking a preventative approach to health improvement will have multiple benefits. The primary benefit is the improvement of quality of life for the ageing populations and increased autonomy into old age. The World Health Organisation recommends active ageing reduces the risk of non-communicable diseases and chronic diseases throughout life, but especially so in old age.^v Active ageing additionally benefits society – those who have retired often still volunteer for local organisations, charities, or spend time assisting families and friends with childcare and other unpaid positions. This has a hidden economic benefit from unpaid labour, as well as costs saved in medical care.^{vi}

If active ageing is not promoted, and facilitated through adequate social investment, we can expect to see increased strain on our health care system, and a rise in unmet need. Aotearoa has an increasing elderly population, and simultaneously a proportionally decreasing number of GPs. With healthcare needs increasing as people age, and general practices increasingly at capacity, access to timely care will diminish. This will cause individuals to visit secondary care, putting further strain on hospitals, or they would not access care at all, worsening their quality of life. Without access to care, the benefits listed previously may not be realised. The Centre for Disease Control (CDC) found that an estimated \$3.2 was saved for every \$1 investment in measures to encourage moderate physical activity.^{vii}

The Health New Zealand Te Whatu Ora '2024 health status' report shows that within the top 10 avoidable contributors to the Māori – Pasifika / non-Māori life expectancy gap includes diabetes and coronary heart disease, each accounting for 0.7 years on average.^{viii} With effective implementation of active ageing and living within communities, cases of coronary heart disease will reduce, and cases of type 2 diabetes can be reduced or better managed. Therefore, promoting active ageing across Aotearoa will help contribute to reducing health inequities.

How to support active ageing

Accessibility

Active ageing needs to be supported by ensuring accessibility for older adults is considered in the design and organisation of social development. Exercise is integral to active ageing so physical activities suitable for older adults needs to be available. This is often in the form of low-impact activities such as aerobics, aqua-aerobics, Tai Chi, yoga, or walking groups. Additionally, regular fitness sessions suitable for an ageing population can provide a variety of benefits: improved sleep, better blood pressure, bone strength, improved balance (reducing risk of falls) and brain health.^{ix} Initiatives like these help older adults stay mobile improve their strength and flexibility and reduce the risks of non-communicable diseases.

Urban planning can aid active ageing. Local councils building walking and cycling tracks to encourage outdoor exercise can help incentivise exercise, increase independence and foster a more social community. Having local community centres near senior communities would enable social interaction while encouraging physical activity and ensure easy access. Designing open spaces such as public parks can benefit mental health and allow for the above-mentioned activities to take place in areas where a community centre or gym is not available. For instances where these initiatives are not possible, having public transport available is integral to supporting activity and independence. Physical mobility issues, worsening eyesight, or cognitive impairment can result in older adults no longer being able to drive. This increases sedentary, isolated lifestyles and increased loneliness.^x

The findings from Life and Living in Advanced Age, a Cohort Study in New Zealand (LiLACS) show older Māori value time with whanau and hapu and work within their communities more than non-Māori.^{xi} Therefore, activities available for all whanau to enjoy jointly, and are accessible will integrate more easily with such community priorities. A study informed by a kaupapa Māori approach to wellbeing found community-centred exercise programmes are indicated to have greater effect on the physical and mental health than individual-focus programmes.^{xii}

Healthy Homes

Healthy homes impact the health of residents throughout their lives, and the elderly are the most vulnerable. To ensure health throughout individuals' lives, continuing to provide all of Aotearoa with healthy homes to live in is essential to improve health and wellbeing. Insulated housing is especially important for the elderly, as winter months impact them more severely.^{xiii} Diabetes, arthritis and Parkinson's are some of the medical conditions that can make the elderly more susceptible to the cold. The Winter months can also increase the chance of falls, making outdoor activities including walking less viable, resulting in more time spent at home, so homes must be kept warm and mould-free.

Housing distribution is also an inequity faced by Māori, with less home ownership compared with non-Māori. As noted by Healthy Homes, a lack of housing security and homeownership are correlated with worse health outcomes in the area, with populations "*more likely to be exposed to poorer rental housing conditions*".^{xiv} Additionally, Māori are more likely to experience over-crowding in homes, also found to be correlated with negative health outcomes.

General practice and Continuity of Care

The wellbeing of ageing populations will rely heavily on, timely access to general practice. With older adults more likely to have medical conditions, quality poly-pharmacy management will need to be maintained. This can be a pre-requisite for active living. If multiple medications are not well managed, there is a higher risk of adverse drug reactions.^{xv} Additionally, age causes changes in the kidneys effectiveness to filter out medications taken, so doses of each medication need ongoing review. These factors, combined with the growing ageing population, result in a need for pharmacy and general practice to be adequately funded and staffed to meet these needs.

General practice support older adults with medication and managing ageing from the continuous care provided and resulting relationships that form. Therefore, general practice can help promote active ageing through giving tailored advice to patients, and informing them of helpful initiatives, such as the green prescription programme, which can support them.^{xvi}

Conclusion

Supporting active ageing in New Zealand is intricately linked to the healthcare system's ability to meet the diverse and evolving needs of older adults. Chronic disease management, preventive healthcare, mental health support, and integrated care models are all essential elements of a healthcare system that fosters active ageing. By ensuring older generations have accessible means to healthcare services, New Zealand can empower older adults to live healthier, more independent lives.

As the ageing population continues to grow, it is crucial that transport, urban planning, workplaces, and homes all have the needs of older adults considered. Simultaneously, preparing our general practices, pharmacies and health system to handle the expected increase older population will yield benefits in their wellbeing, and saved costs.

If you require further clarification, please contact Maureen Gillon, Manager Policy, Advocacy, Insights – Maureen.Gillon@rnzcgp.org.nz.

Nāku noa, nā



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