



Australian Government  
Department of Health and Ageing



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# Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda

A Background Paper to the  
National Symposium on Ageing Research

AAARA

## Introduction

Soundly-based research is recognised internationally as a critical underpinning for the decision making processes for ageing societies. Many have championed the issue of ageing research in Australia and overseas since the trend towards the structural ageing of populations was identified and much expertise and effort have been devoted to considering the research issues pertinent to an ageing Australia.

The development of a sound evidence base to inform decisions is a key principle of the National Strategy for an Ageing Australia, described by the Prime Minister, the Hon John Howard MP as “a blueprint for our actions and decisions with respect to population ageing” (Foreword to National Strategy for an Ageing Australia – An Older Australia, Challenges and Opportunities for all; Commonwealth of Australia; 2001).

This evidence base needs to be built around an Australian ageing research agenda, developed and endorsed by stakeholders with an interest in the challenges of demographic ageing. An Australian Ageing Research Agenda will assist government policy makers, researchers, universities, funders and potential collaborators (including the private sector) in making the right investments in research needed to inform policy development, practice and decisions given the structural ageing of Australia’s population.

## CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The 2003 research environment	2
Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda	4
Mechanisms for Moving Forward	6
Conclusion	6

# Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda

This paper draws on the wealth of existing documented work on ageing research and recent consultations with Australian experts in policy and research fields to articulate a framework for the development of an Australian Ageing Research Agenda. The accompanying paper *Stocktake of Australian Ageing Research and Policy Initiatives* summarises relevant background information.

The framework builds on the main research issues identified in a range of reports, reviews and consultations including the Expert Forum on Ageing Research held in Canberra on 9 December 2002.

The issues identified are the ones facing policy makers and researchers in 2003 and the foreseeable future. However, the profile of the Australian population will continue to change. In twenty years time, the population aged over 65 is projected to be growing at three times the rate of the population aged between 15 and 64. By 2051, the proportion of the population over 65 is expected to have doubled and the median age of the population is expected to have risen from 35 years to 46 years.

While population projections indicate that the structural change of the Australian population is unavoidable, the change will be protracted, and the full impact will not be felt for some years. Accordingly, the research priorities and themes identified now may change with time and will need to be subject to review at appropriate intervals in the future. An Australian Ageing Research Agenda should, therefore, be a dynamic document, responsive to changes in the development of the evidence base and the identification of emerging policy priorities and information needs.

## **The 2003 Research Environment**

The research environment in 2003 is very different to what it was even a few years ago. A number of new initiatives provide increased impetus for the development of an Australian Ageing Research Agenda.

The announcement by the Prime Minister in December 2002 of National Research Priorities, and the establishment of a process requiring Australian Government research agencies to develop plans outlining how they propose to implement these National Research Priorities, has been the catalyst for a range of activities to help focus Australia's research effort.

The four National Research Priorities announced by the Prime Minister are:

1. *An Environmentally Sustainable Australia;*
2. *Promoting and Maintaining Good Health;*
3. *Frontier Technologies for Building and Transforming Australian Industries; and*
4. *Safeguarding Australia.*

For the purposes of developing an Australian Ageing Research Agenda, it is of particular relevance that "promoting and maintaining good health" was identified as a research priority and that the following three goals were identified under this priority:

1. *A healthy start to life*
2. *Ageing well, ageing productively*
3. *Preventive healthcare*

Work undertaken by the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) has progressed these priorities; in particular, two independent working groups of PMSEIC presented, to the tenth meeting in June 2003, reports on *Promoting Healthy Ageing in Australia* and *Brain and Mind Disorders: impact of the neurosciences*.

The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) has also reviewed and reorganised its research activities in its response to the National Research Priorities initiative. CSIRO has identified five Flagship Programs, one of which is the Preventative Health (P-Health) Flagship Research Program.

Major research funding bodies, such as the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Australian Research Council (ARC) are also developing approaches consistent with the directions of the National Research Priorities.

One key development has been the strengthening emphasis by the NHMRC and ARC on collaboration, cross-disciplinary work, research networks and capacity building. This strategic direction is clearly articulated in the National Research Priorities and is welcome support for the directions set by the Building Ageing Research Capacity (BARC) Steering Committee in efforts to build Australia's ageing research capacity.

The current environment is thus particularly conducive to exploring the policy and research issues related to the structural ageing of the Australian population and to seeking opportunities for partnerships, alliances and various forms of collaboration in developing an agenda for Australian research on these issues.

### **Building Ageing Research Capacity (BARC) Project**

The Building Ageing Research Capacity (BARC) project is a collaborative venture between the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Office for an Ageing Australia, Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

Commenced in mid-2002, the BARC Project is aimed at developing and encouraging maximum collaboration and coordination between Australian researchers and policy makers on ageing issues. Better collaboration and coordination are seen as key elements in improving the quality and quantity of the evidence base available to inform policy development work.

Two outcomes of this project in 2003-04 are:

- the **National Symposium on Ageing Research: Building Evidence, Policy and Practice**, held in Canberra from 23 to 25 September 2003; and
- the development of a framework for an **Australian Ageing Research Agenda** (this publication is part of that process).

The BARC Project has been managed by the BARC Steering Committee, which is chaired by Dr Diane Gibson, Head of the Welfare Division at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The Committee comprises leading representatives of consumers, researchers, practitioners and policy makers in the field of ageing.

Throughout its short life, the BARC Steering Committee has worked to further develop the information-related aspects of the initiatives laid out in the Australian Government's National Strategy for an Ageing Australia (the Australian Government's strategic response to the ageing of the Australian population).

In December 2002, the Steering Committee convened an Expert Forum on Ageing Research held in Canberra to begin development of an Australian Ageing Research Agenda. The Steering Committee has also been responsible for development of the **Ageing Research Online (ARO)** web site which will be launched at the Symposium in September 2003. The ARO will provide an important facility for supporting the growing research network and promoting the ageing research agenda.

The development of a cohesive agenda for ageing research in Australia is an important step toward addressing the evidence needs of policy makers and practitioners facing the challenges and opportunities presented by an ageing Australian population.

# Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda

## **Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda**

A solid foundation for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda is provided by previous work done both in Australia and internationally. Two categories of issues emerge from this work:

- **Strategic Priorities for Building Ageing Research Capacity** – dealing with research infrastructure, practices and processes; and
- **Strategic Ageing Research Themes** – dealing with research subject matter and themes.

### **Strategic Priorities for Building Ageing Research Capacity**

In building capacity to respond to the research challenges of an ageing Australia, the following six priority areas have been identified as requiring support and development to maximise the potential of the Australian research community. These issues emerged from the analysis of two influential reports: *A Review of Healthy Ageing Research in Australia* (Commonwealth of Australia; 2001) and the *Scoping Study on Ageing Research* (NHMRC; unpublished report), and were further refined in discussions conducted at the Expert Forum on Ageing Research held in Canberra in December 2002.

The strategic priorities identified are:

1. Supporting the achievement of excellence in ageing research methods and outcomes through appropriate training, collaboration and workforce development;
2. Supporting the translation of ageing research into practice through more widespread use of trademarking, benchmarking and recognition of best practice by appropriately qualified bodies, both government (NHMRC, NICS) and non-government (Cochrane Library), depending on the issue;
3. Supporting better use and dissemination of existing research through improved networking, collaboration and use of appropriate “clearing house” arrangements (in part through the Australian Ageing Research Online (ARO) web site initiative, currently under development);
4. Supporting greater emphasis on multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral initiatives to help turn the existing diversity of research effort into a substantial body of knowledge available to address emerging ageing policy issues;
5. Supporting efforts to address gaps in existing ageing research and identify emerging issues through better dialogue between researchers, government, industry and consumers;
6. Supporting ageing researchers to remain connected to and active in the international research effort on ageing.

The BARC project is supporting the development of ageing research capacity by:

- Convening an Expert Forum on Ageing Research on 9 December 2002 to help progress the ageing research agenda in the light of emerging policy priorities;
- Developing an Ageing Research Online (ARO) web site, which will include an on-line, real time version of the Australian Ageing Research Directory and opportunities for ageing research networking and information sharing on-line;
- Encouraging other ageing research capacity building efforts (for example, the University of Queensland's Emerging Researchers in Ageing fora for post-graduate students); and
- Convening a National Symposium on Ageing Research in September 2003.

### Strategic Ageing Research Themes

The Expert Forum on Ageing Research, held in Canberra on 9 December 2002, was one key stage in the larger process to develop the infrastructure for a growing research effort to support evidence-based policy development.

Six key policy issues, derived primarily from the *National Strategy for an Ageing Australia – An Older Australia, Challenges and Opportunities for all* (Commonwealth of Australia; 2001), the *Intergenerational Report* (Commonwealth of Australia; 2002), and the *Commonwealth, State and Territory Strategy on Healthy Ageing report* (Commonwealth, States and Territories; 2000), were explored at the Expert Forum:

1. Maintaining economic growth in the face of an ageing workforce and reduction in the supply of younger workers.
2. Achieving adequate, sustainable retirement income over lengthening periods of retirement.
3. Developing positive images of ageing and supporting continued social participation.
4. Developing age-friendly infrastructure and built environment.
5. Achieving healthy ageing to maintain health and independence.
6. Providing accessible, appropriate, high quality health and aged care.

These themes were used to structure the proceedings of the BARC Expert Forum and were generally accepted by participants as representing the main policy/research areas requiring detailed exploration by subject matter experts.

The National Advisory Committee on Ageing and the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Ageing are existing mechanisms for helping to move forward some of these issues. The major challenges are first to maximise the translation of research into policy and practice, and secondly to work toward a tangible, positive impact in the community and on individuals' attitudes, behaviours and quality of life.

# Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda

## **National Symposium on Ageing Research: Building Evidence, Policy and Practice**

The National Symposium on Ageing Research: Building Evidence, Policy and Practice is being held at the Australian National University from the 23 to 25 September 2003. The two-and-a-half day program features an exceptional list of internationally and nationally recognised researchers, leading policy makers, and influential industry and community representatives.

Further details are available at [www.ageingsymposium.com.au](http://www.ageingsymposium.com.au)

## **Mechanisms for Moving Forward**

The National Strategy for an Ageing Australia recognises the need for sound research to develop the evidence base required to support policy decision making about ageing issues. The proposed framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda provides a structure around which to build this evidence.

In order to move forward, mechanisms and processes, supported by multidisciplinary networks and defined by common policy and research interests, are required to develop areas of the framework. At present, some aspects are more developed than others. For example, more work needs to be done to define priorities and identify specific researchable questions within the strategic ageing research themes.

A number of mechanisms have been established to help build on the previous reports and community consultations around the issues of ageing in Australia and all of these have a role to play in support of ageing research. The BARC Project will support and enhance the development of a network of ageing researchers and provide opportunities for increased collaboration and cross-discipline research through the Ageing Research Online (ARO) web site. The BARC project will also pursue more collaborative working arrangements with the NHMRC, CSIRO and the ARC. Each of these groups has a role and interest in progressing an Australian Ageing Research Agenda.

## **Conclusion**

The articulation of a framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda is a recognition of the wealth of research potential and capacity available to inform the decision making for an ageing Australia, and the need to harness and develop that capability in strategic ways to ensure the best outcomes for all.

Stakeholder input to, and endorsement of, an Australian Ageing Research Agenda will be an important step towards ensuring it becomes a fundamental consideration for those embarking on or seeking to support research relevant to Australia's ageing population.

The National Symposium on Ageing Research will provide an opportunity to explore this challenge in more depth and to canvass any necessary changes to the proposed framework. Participants will also have the opportunity to address particular issues of interest and contribute their thoughts about ways to move forward.

Outcomes of the final 'synthesising session' of the Symposium will contribute to the refinement of a responsive and policy relevant ageing research agenda for the next 5 to 10 years. Ultimately, the Australian Ageing Research Agenda will be incorporated into the Ageing Research Online (ARO) web site to help support and focus further capacity building efforts.

### **Ageing Research Online (ARO) web site**

Ageing research has become increasingly important in recent years as the trend towards the structural ageing of populations has become a prominent issue. Ageing Research Online (ARO) is a response to a recognised need to improve communication and collaboration between researchers in ageing from the tertiary, government, non-government and private sectors as well as interested persons from consumer organisations and the public.



ARO is, first and foremost, an interactive web-based directory of ageing related research projects, courses of education, and grants and awards. It also provides a web forum and newsletter facility, and a noticeboard of upcoming events in the ageing and ageing-related fields.

ARO has been designed to service a wide range of users and needs. The ageing and wider research community is provided with an interactive web-interface to register their ageing related research projects, information on available grants and awards and contact information directly into the database. The general public is provided access to this register and can gather information on research projects, organisations, researchers, research topics, resource materials, courses of education, relevant links and contact information.

This valuable facility will soon be available. It will be up to researchers, policy-makers and other stakeholders to maximise its potential by using the ARO in their day to day work and keeping it up to date and relevant to all users.

The Hon Kevin Andrews MP, Australian Government Minister for Ageing, will launch version 1 of the Ageing Research Online (ARO) web site in September 2003.

**[www.aro.gov.au](http://www.aro.gov.au)**

(available post-launch on 23 September 2003)



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For further information, or to provide comments on the Framework for an Australian Ageing Research Agenda, contact [BARCSec@aihw.gov.au](mailto:BARCSec@aihw.gov.au).