

EDITORIAL

In every country there exists a demographic imperative -- the growth of the elderly population -- which demands a response from the community of health care professionals. This, combined with increasing life expectancy, has led to the development of ageing related health care programmes with associated service delivery systems, research into age-related illnesses, and the establishment or expansion of health care disciplines working with the elderly.

As Hong Kong proceeds into the 21st century with attendant political, bureaucratic and professional challenges it is responding to the need of its ageing population. From amongst the ranks of its psychiatrists a dedicated sub-group has devoted considerable intellect and energy into the practice of geriatric psychiatry. That a Special Issue is entirely given over to the work of geriatric psychiatry reflects the high quality of the work of this group and augers well for the future.

This Issue addresses many relevant and challenging concerns and seeks answers to many research questions. The poignancy of the 'The Case of Mrs. Holmes' demonstrated humility and humanity leading to the action of seeking a brief clinical instrument, the SPMSQ, to address the deficiency of 'invisible dementia'. Epidemiological and service review sought answers to 'Who are the patients?' and are they 'old growing mad?' or 'mad growing old?'; and who present to the psychogeriatric clinic? who attend the joint geriatric - psychogeriatric clinics? These are very important answers upon which the design and development of service delivery systems are founded.

The burden of care givers is a very cogent matter which, all over the world, workers are attempting to address. The question of what and how much dementia exists in the Chinese population is briefly but credibly answered and once again the preponderance of vascular dementia over primary degenerative dementia in the Chinese is confirmed, which begs the heuristic question of 'why is it so?'

Clinical and research instruments in psychiatry have been largely developed in a Caucasian context in Britain or USA. Translation into Asian language instruments requires the vigour of testing its validity, sensitivity and specificity demanding considerable skill. The Cantonese version of the MMSE and the revised Hasegawa Dementia Scale both have demonstrated considerable usefulness and relevance.

Empirical observation is an essential clinical art in medicine. The reporting of the use of benzodiazepine in the treatment of 'catatonia' has all the hallmarks of good clinical practice leading to the development of therapeutic innovations awaiting neurobiological clarification.

As depression is a very treatable psychiatric illness in the elderly, the presence of a detailed review reminds the readers of the phenomena, diagnosis, therapeutics and prognosis of this under-diagnosed and under-treated condition.

Ageist attitudes presupposes that all elderly are weak, decrepit, and unable to cope with accompanying physical and psychological vicissitudes of ageing. The paper on 'Stress, Coping and Ageing' provides a balanced view showing that most aged persons are better at coping with stressful life events than we give them credit. Such an enlightened review reminds all of us to examine our attitudes towards the aged person and actively challenges our preconceived notions, to value our elderly citizens and look behind and beyond the pathology for the persons who are deserving of our respect, whose strength and resourcefulness far outweigh their frailty.

Whilst Japan and Australia, of all the Asian-Pacific countries, have a well developed geriatric psychiatry discipline, this geographical region does lag behind the developments in Europe and North America.

The International Psychogeriatric Association, committed to the mission of fostering psychogeriatric medicine around the world, held its 4th Congress in Tokyo in 1989, under the Chairmanship of Professor Hasegawa, and highlighted the needs of the elderly in the Asian-Pacific region. In 1995, the 7th Congress of the IPA will be held in Sydney, Australia under the writers Chairmanship, thus placing further emphasis and encouragement for work in this region.

Each Asian-Pacific country, including Hong Kong and China have been very mindful of the need to urgently develop service programmes for the elderly, training of professional staff, and foster necessary research to support and enhance such activities.

This Special Issue marks the coming of age of Geriatric Psychiatry in Hong Kong, revealing its breadth and depth of commitment of its member psychiatrists who can, with pride, genuinely be part of the world fraternity dedicated to the health and well-being of our older citizens.

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Melbourne, October 1994*

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