inadequate services and support for seniors arise when a country isn’t prepared for its ageing population. Photo: AFP

Are we ready to meet the needs of Malaysia’s fast ageing population?
This demographic shift is a good thing, says Universiti Malaya public health specialist Assoc Prof Dr Noran Mohd Hairi. “Population ageing isn’t something to be mourned. Rather, it should be celebrated because it speaks of our public health success and advances in medicine which have led to longer life expectancies, declining fertility and maternal mortality rates,” said Dr Noran.

The problem only arises when a country isn’t prepared for its ageing population and does not have adequate support systems in place to meet the needs of an older population. These include improved services for older people, support for caregivers, specific laws that safeguard elders, community engagement programmes and services for an older population, to name a few.

“The change has been rapid. Unlike in developed countries like France where population ageing has been gradual, the shift has been fast and rapid in developing countries like ours. As a result, we have not had as much time to put in place the infrastructures needed to cater for an ageing population. We need to catch up,” noted Dr Noran.

She was speaking at the “Elders Matter: Safeguarding our Elders” forum organised by Star2 with Universiti Malaya’s Julius Centre last weekend. The forum discussed topics related to ageing and elder care, elder abuse, the need for proper systems and services to support the elderly and the role the community has to play in an ageing population.

Other speakers included Dr Noran’s colleagues from UM’s Prevent Elder Abuse and Neglect Initiative (Peace) Assoc Prof Dr Sajaratulnisah Othman and Assoc Prof Dr Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia medical lecturer Dr Tengku Amatullah Madeehah Tengku Mohd and Parameswary Ramanathan who runs the Mother Care Old Folks Homes in Seremban.
In the first scenario presented, an adult son was stealing money from his elderly father and forcing the old man to give him a sizable sum from his pension, abusing him verbally and threatening harm if he didn’t get what he wanted.

Dr Siti Zaharah started the discussion going, highlighting the legal recourse that is currently available.

“Elder abuse and neglect fall under the ambit of the Domestic Violence Act (DVA). However, we have to bear in mind that the DVA was formed mainly to address spousal abuse. But it is applicable to the elderly by virtue of the definition of ‘incapacitated adults’ due to their old age. In the financial abuse case, stealing money would be a simple case of theft. But the fact that the elderly man was threatened both verbally and physically … that would fall under the DVA because the threat was by made by a member of the family,” she explains.

However, to receive protection under the DVA, the elderly parent has to file a police report and apply for a protection order from the courts. The authorities cannot step in unless a report has been filed and in most Asian countries, family matters – even abuse – are mostly kept within closed doors.

“In our society, it is very rare for a parent to bring a case against his child. That is where the issue lies … the refusal of the elderly to report cases of abuse,” says Dr Siti Zaharah, a UM law lecturer. While Dr Siti Zaharah is lobbying for specific laws that protect and safeguard the needs of the elderly, she stresses that the solution to the problem of elder abuse does not lie in the law.

“Law is not the solution for everything. We are talking about human issues and family matters. If the family is not there, how can you talk about elder abuse?”
Participants also urged the government to regulate retirement and nursing care facilities for the elderly so that the public will be able to tell the good apples from the rotten ones. Although Parameswary highlighted the regular checks on homes by the Welfare Department, participants wanted there to be a clear “rating system” to make it easier for the public to choose a home that complies to the standards set by the government.

While there was a consensus that the government need to do more for its ageing population, the panelists highlighted the need for communities to play their part. This includes changing attitudes towards ageing and creating an age-friendly culture that embraces the elderly instead of isolating them.
Despite their contribution to society, older people are frequently stereotyped as being dependent, frail, out of touch or worse still, a burden. These are ageist attitudes that need to be corrected. Here are 10 popular misconceptions about the elderly.

1. All old people are alike

Older people are diverse. Some 80-year-olds have better physical and mental capacity than many 20-year-olds – one example is Fauja Singh, who retired from marathon running in 2013, just a few months short of his 102 birthday! However, others of the same age may require extensive care and support for basic activities like dressing and eating.

2. Old age = inactivity

Most people over the age of 70 experience a number of health conditions at the same time. But with the advances of medicine, they continue to be able to do the things that are important to them.

3. Families can take care of their elderly

In Asian families, it is understood that children have the responsibility of caring for their elderly. While families must play a central role in long-term care, the changing demography (smaller families) and social norms mean it is impossible for families alone to meet the care-giving needs. There has to be training and support available for caregivers and the responsibility for care should be shared between families, governments and the community.

4. It's all about genes

Only approximately 25% of whether you live into old age is hereditary. The remaining 75% of whether you live into old age is determined by lifestyle, environment and other factors.

5. Mandatory retirement creates jobs for youths

Policies enforcing a mandatory retirement age will not help create jobs for youths. The best way to help youths is to create a more competitive economy that rewards talent and skill.
A resource site for seniors and a platform for them to raise issues that matter to them.

E-mail: lily@seniorsaloud.com
www.seniorsaloud.com

Malaysian Healthy Ageing Society
A non-profit organisation that focuses on educating the public about healthy ageing issues.
012-364 6109
E-mail: info@healthyageing.org
www.healthyageing.org

Befrienders Malaysia
For counselling support.
03-7956 8144 / 03-7956 8145
E-mail: sam@befrienders.org.my

U3A Malaysia
A programme under the Lifelong Learning for Older Malaysians project started by Universiti Putra Malaysia.
012-330 0819
E-mail: u3amalaysia@gmail.com / u3aklssel@gmail.com
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