International Year of Older Persons and the IAG

The 1999 International Year of Older Persons (IYOP ’99) has great relevance for the IAG and its member associations. Ageing is now widely recognised as a major global social, economic and humanitarian issue.

In the United Nations the issue was first raised in 1948 at the initiative of Argentina with the preparation at that time, of a ‘draft declaration on old age rights’. Then more than 20 years later the question was again placed on the agenda of the UN General Assembly at the initiative of Malta leading eventually in 1982 to the advent of the World Assembly on Ageing held, in that year, in Vienna, Austria. This was followed in the same year by the General Assembly’s adoption of the International Plan of Action on Ageing (The Vienna Plan of Action). In 1990, the UN General Assembly designated October 1, as the International Day of Older Persons, an occasion now celebrated annually by many countries. In the following year the assembly formally adopted the United National Principles for Older Persons.

Finally, 10 years after the Vienna World Assembly adopted the proclamation on ageing in which it inter alia ‘... 3. Decides to observe the year 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons ... in recognition of humanity’s demographic coming of age and the promise it holds for maturing attitudes and capabilities in social, economic, cultural and spiritual undertakings, not least for global peace and development in the next century.’

IYOP provides an unprecedented opportunity to galvanize attention and subsequent action in response to the global phenomenon of ageing. It provides the opportunity of seeing ageing at individual and societal levels in a new light – to develop a positive vision of ageing as an affirmation of the value of life itself.

Ageing is a universal experience. For a variety of reasons we examine and note the differences in the expression and experience of ageing in various guises: between genders, between developed and developing countries of the world and the variety of ways in which differing societies and cultures respond to the phenomenon. These variations are important, but underlying this heterogeneity is a common reality that touches all, providing a common bond and an enormous potential for sharing experiences, learning from one another and ultimately devolving effective individual and societal responses.

1999 is a watershed year for human ageing – it has the potential to significantly alter the deeply rooted precepts and misconceptions of ageing and its consequences that have abounded everywhere.

The conceptual framework developed in relation to IYOP suggests a theme, objective and four dimensions for particular attention in the preparations and observance of the Year.

The theme for the Year: ‘Towards a Society for All Ages’ reflects a growing concern for ensuring age integration. The theme is derived from discussions on achieving a ‘society for all’ at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development. A ‘society for all ages’ is one that enables generations to invest in one another and share the fruits of that investment guided by the twin principles of reciprocity and equity.
The stated objective for the Year is the ‘Promotion of the United Nations Principles for Older Persons’. These principles address the interdependence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of older persons.

The four dimensions of the conceptual framework provide critical support for the concepts of a society for all ages.

The first dimension is the ‘situation of older persons’ and it provides a link back to areas of primary concern expressed in the International Plan of Action including health and nutrition, housing and the environment, the family, social welfare, income security and employment. The International Year will facilitate the revisiting of these issues in terms of the recommendations of the plan of action itself and the subsequently developed global targets on ageing for the year 2001. These considerations should facilitate practical actions supporting the interdependence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of older persons as outlined in the United Nations principles for older persons.

The second dimension is ‘life-long individual development’ which recognizes that in a world where more and more individuals can expect to live to 90 years or more in a living environment that is continually changing, individuals need particular life skills: foresight, self-reliance, interdependence, flexibility and ingenuity. They need an enabling environment fostering lifelong education, skills upgrading, and healthy lifestyles. Many need midlife support for making transition into old age, a time for fulfilling individual aspirations and for adjusting family life, careers and lifestyles.

The third dimension highlights ‘multigenerational relationships’ noting that the demographic, socioeconomic and cultural revolutions affecting societies also affect relationships between generations – between children, parents, grandparents and between workers and retirees. Thus, relationships in both family and society are affected. As more individuals live into very old age, two needs arise to the fore: income security and care. In traditional societies, family and community provided both. As societies modernize (and their populations age), these responsibilities come to be shared by the society at large, through inter-generational transfers between working and retired populations, often facilitated by insurance and savings elders accumulated in their earlier years. The speed and scope of change gives rise to a need for continuing research, debate and adjustments.

The final dimension of ‘development and ageing of populations’ poses the challenge of reconciling population ageing with socioeconomic development. This requires multisectoral adjustments including employment, income security, social welfare, health care and education as well as investment, consumption and savings patterns. One of the principal directions for such adjustment is ensuring that older persons have opportunities to participate and contribute as well as to receive care when needed. Another objective is to establish an age-integrated society, one that fosters reciprocity and equity between generations even as it encourages lifelong development and self-reliance on the part of individuals.

In his Report to the General Assembly on Preparations for the Year, the UN Secretary General proposed a fresh vision of ageing that emphasizes ageing as a process occurring over the life course, the importance of multigenerational citizenship and relationship of individual ageing to issues of family, community and macro-societal responses. More imaginative and creative approaches are called for to achieve a truly age-integrated society for the future.

There are many actions, projects and activities to be undertaken at all levels in pursuit of the goals and objectives inherent in these statements. I want to refer to just two very important ones in which the International Association of Gerontology as an organisation has a significant part to play.

Development of a Research Agenda for the Twenty-First Century

This project will extend over a 3-year period beginning with the formulation of an initial research agenda framework developed by an expert consultative group that met in Vienna earlier this year. The initial meetings are being sponsored by the IAG on behalf of the UN and are being supported by the Novartis Foundation for Gerontological Research. The expert consultative meeting will identify key priorities for research necessary to guide future policy directions and identified organisations, agencies and individuals that can pursue in depth consideration of each of the areas of priority. The results of the initial consultation and the further development of key areas will be further canvassed and refined at a meeting to be held in Berlin just prior to the Regional IAG Congress in July. The final formulation of the agenda will be undertaken by a second expert consultation sometime in 2000 for the ultimate consideration and endorsement of the General Assembly of the UN and formal transmission to member states for consideration and action. The production of the Agenda for Research is intended to gain the commitment of governments, international agencies, research foundations and researchers themselves to a major investment in poli-
cy relevant research on ageing during the first decade of the coming century.

Development of a Policy Framework for a Society for All Ages

This project will also be initiated with an inter-regional expert group meeting to take place in June this year back to back with the Seoul Regional IAG Meeting. The intention is to provide guidelines to national governments in the development of appropriate policy responses to populations ageing into the next century.

This exercise is aimed at adding substance to the rhetoric; at proposing action in response to reflection and to provide guidance to nations everywhere and the international community in general in the formulation of sound and practical responses to the multifaceted and complex challenges posed by the major shifts in the demographic profiles of all nations.

None of these initiatives and others associated with the Year can be achieved in a vacuum. Profound changes in the social, economic, environmental and political landscapes will occur at the same time and must be taken into consideration in reviewing our future scenarios. Future shock is already upon us and the rate of change will continue to accelerate. Our responses must be solutions designed for tomorrow not just reactions to yesterday's problems.

Finally, I challenge all of us involved in ageing to critically examine our own precepts, motivations and directions and not just to assume that we have all of the answers. 1999 should provide an opportunity for new and creative approaches, better understanding and more informed responses to the issues associated with ageing.

In spite of the enormity of the challenges I remain convinced that working together, collectively and co-operatively, at this point in history we can make a difference and we will!

The international Association of Gerontology, its regional committees and member associations have an important contribution to make in these global efforts aimed at achieving a future better society for all ages.

Gary R. Andrews
President of IAG
Special Adviser on Ageing to the United Nations, New York, N.Y. (USA)

Prizes for Outstanding Researchers of Ageing

International Association of Gerontology
Novartis Prize for Gerontological Research

The Jury Panel met on February 20 to decide the recipients of the 1999 award. The Novartis Foundation for Gerontological Research provides funds for this biennial IAG research prize that is awarded to individuals with an outstanding record of advancing gerontological knowledge. Winners can be individuals or teams who have made a significant research contribution in a particular area of gerontology or geriatrics, encouraged and trained younger research workers, and given impetus to progress in these fields in some other comparable way.

The prize is typically shared by researchers working in the biomedical and social-behavioural sciences. This year was no exception and from an outstanding international field of applicants, two winners were selected: Professor Paul Baltes of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Professor Edward Lakatta, Head of the National Institute of Ageing, Gerontology Research Center’s Program on Cardiovascular Disease. The awards are presented at regional IAG meetings, and each winner delivers a paper that provides an overview of their contributions to the field. Dr. Lakkata will receive his award in Korea and Professor Baltes in Berlin, during the respective IAG regional meetings in June and July, 1999.

Paul Baltes was honored for his fundamental work on the psychology of ageing. He and his co-workers in Berlin have contributed extensively to our understanding of cognitive aspects of ageing and in the definition of wisdom as an important attribute of the ageing mind. Paul Baltes worked closely with his late wife Margaret in formulating a now widely acknowledged psychological model of successful ageing. This work has significantly influenced modern thinking about the nature of human ageing and its consequences.

Edward Lakatta’s research on the other hand has focussed on the physiology and pathology of the ageing heart and vascular system. The extensive creative work of Ed Lakatta and his colleagues has led to new concepts and understanding of ageing at the most fundamental molecular levels and in terms of clinical findings that are critically important in the management of cardiovascular disease in older persons. Dr. Lakatta’s work related to ageing in health and age associated diseases over more than two decades has helped unravel the complicated interactions that occur among the ‘ageing process’, disease and lifestyle, both in humans and in animal models. This work has profoundly influenced understanding of ageing as a
major risk factor for cardiovascular disease in western society and has led to important developments in prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease associated with ageing. The International Association of Gerontology is very pleased to acknowledge the vitally important contributions to our knowledge and understanding of ageing made by these two exemplary scientists in the realms of human physiology, pathology and psychology.

Ewald W. Busse Research Awards

During the Pan American Congress of the IAG, the Fourth Ewald W. Busse Research Awards were made to early career researchers in social/behavioural and biomedical sciences. The purpose of the awards is to recognize the achievements of promising scientists and to encourage their continued contributions to ageing research. Renée Lawrence of the New England Research Institutes, Watertown, Massachusetts, and Andres E. Stuck of the University of Bern received the awards.

Dr. Lawrence’s research interests include ethnic patterns of health and social support, health measurement, care giver-care recipient relationships, and disablement. Dr. Lawrence has received several grants from the US National Institute on Ageing and has published in some of the top gerontological journals. Most notably, she received the 1997 Sage Publication Editor’s Award for the best peer-reviewed publication in the social and behavioural sciences in 1996.

Dr. Stuck’s research interests include development and testing of the method of comprehensive geriatric assessment. He is currently involved with the development of a new multidimensional instrument for disability prevention among the elderly. His work has been highly recognized in both Switzerland and Germany through his publications.

The award is named after Dr. Ewald W. Busse, J.P. Gibbons Professor and Dean Emeritus, as well as founder of Duke University’s Center for the Study of Ageing and Human Development, where the endowment is administered.

Meeting of the IAG Executive

In conjunction with the Pan American Congress of the IAG in San Antonio, the Executive held a meeting, to which Regional Chairs were invited. Selected outcomes are reported next.

Membership: Some 62 organisations now belong to the IAG. As noted in the previous column, Thailand and the Philippines applied for membership of the IAG. A postal vote of Council Members was resoundingly supportive of the admission of Thai Society for Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine to the IAG. The application from the Philippines did not meet criteria for multidisciplinary membership. They are now in the process of re-constituting a national society that better reflects the IAG criterion of multidisciplinary and includes basic and social scientists as well as medically qualified individuals. Advice for interested prospective member organisations can be found in the IAG by-laws on the web at <<www.cas.flinders.edu.au/iag>>.

World Congresses. The 1997 World Congress has been formally financially liquidated. Plans for the next World Congress 2001 in Vancouver were the topic of a meeting of the Program Planning Committee held in San Antonio, prior to the Pan American Congress. Arrangements for the format of the programme, suggestions for invited speakers and symposia organisers and possible allied activities were considered.

Manual of Operating Procedures (MOP). The current MOP was present to the council and accepted at the 1985 New York Congress. An addendum was presented in 1993 and approved by the then council. Revision of the MOP, subject to council approval, was seen as an alternative to alteration of the official by-laws, according to Belgian Law.

A draft revision of MOP comprising amalgamation procedures devised in 1989 and 1993 and presented to Congresses in Acapulco and Budapest, respectively, is currently being considered by the Executive and Regional Chairs. Draft Revision comprises previous addenda that have been re-written to make them more generic and to delete obsolete information, and amendments agreed during Council Meetings of the IAG in Adelaide in 1997. It was agreed that Executive and regional chairs would review the suggested changes. Further meetings will be held in conjunction with the IAG Regional Congresses of Asia/Oceania, in Korea (June, 1999) and the European Region, in Berlin (July, 1999) to consider them.

Other Matters. A detailed financial statement was presented and will be published in the IAG Newsletter, subject to auditing. Some discussion was about strategic directions, the process of putting into place By-laws for the North American Region and, at a separate meeting, formalizing the IAG’s Pan American Congress. Outcomes of these discussions will be the topic of a future column ‘From the IAG’.
Gerontology: Behavioural Sciences Section

The planned expansion of Gerontology to include a Behavioural Science Section commenced with the first issue for 1999. Mary Luszcz is the Associate Editor for the section. The initial composition of the Editorial Board of the section has already undergone some changes. The board, like so many colleagues and friends worldwide, was stunned and greatly saddened by the untimely death of Margaret Baltes. She would have been an invaluable collaborator in this new venture and we deeply regret her passing.

At about the same time, two other colleagues agreed to join the board, Prof. E. Cameron-Traub of Australia and Prof. A. Lowenstein of Israel. The composition of the Board is truly international and covers a breadth of behavioural sciences, including psychology, sociology, biostatistics, nursing, and economics. The Board is still evolving and suggestions of potential members would still be most welcome.

As summarized in an Editorial in the first issue for 1999, the new section will feature research, reviews, and debates on the psychological and behavioural facets of human ageing. It complements the ongoing Experimental Section and Clinical Section. Its inclusion expands the scope of Gerontology to virtually all disciplines concerned with ageing.

Mary Luszcz
Secretary General
International Association for Gerontology