

Growing old is not a sin

Kang Soon Hock

The Straits Times, 28 July 2012

GROWING old is a natural human process, yet when I examine the public exchanges earlier this year it seems to have gained the status of sin.

In stark contrast to the strong opposition to the building of facilities and studio apartments for the elderly within some neighbourhoods, one hardly hears a whimper when the newest suburban mall is proposed and built.

Still, I am heartened to see that the authorities have rightly pushed ahead with the projects after taking into account both positive and negative feedback.

The Nimby (not in my backyard) attitudes and reactions to the development and location of elderly-related facilities raise three issues: firstly, population ageing; secondly, the threat of ageism; and lastly, combating ageism.

Figures released by the National Population and Talent Division last year show that more than 9 per cent of Singapore's resident population is aged 65 and older.

With the first of the baby boomer generation reaching age 65 this year and more to follow, this segment is now of utmost importance. As their numbers grow, demand for elderly-related facilities and services will increase.

There will be expectations that essential eldercare services and infrastructure such as studio apartments are provided and provided adequately, which also gives rise to the 'silver dollar' that businesses can seek to capture.

The Nimby uproar is disconcerting as it adds new challenges to planning in land-scarce Singapore. From a fiscal standpoint, the possible delay in the eventual development of essential facilities may ultimately bring higher costs.

The facilities proposed will not just address the needs of older Singaporeans; these will also benefit younger Singaporeans especially those who have to care for older family members.

The family is the primary source of support for many of the elderly and, with shrinking household sizes, the number of family members available to care for the elderly is declining.

This puts pressure on younger family members - the 'sandwiched' generation - who may themselves have young children to care for on top of having full-time jobs.

For them, the availability of eldercare facilities in housing estates will provide extra support, considering such an eldercare centre provides programmes that caters to diverse needs, from healthy elderly residents to those with physical disabilities.

Such facilities need to be accepted much like other amenities such as shopping malls or MRT stations and bus interchanges. More importantly, once such facilities are there, they benefit younger Singaporeans, who will be next in line to become 'elderly'.

The Nimby-ism demonstrated earlier this year portends increasing ageism in Singapore.

I would like to focus here on ageism rather than Nimby-ism as the latter has already been dealt with in great detail.

What is ageism? Author Beverley Hughes, who wrote *Older People And Community Care*, says it 'is a matrix of beliefs and attitudes which legitimates the use of age as a means of identifying a particular social group, which portrays... that group in negative, stereotypical terms and which consequently generates and reinforces a fear of the ageing process and a denigration of older people'.

This negative perception can be observed in a number of ways such as the reaction towards the building of facilities catering to the elderly in the community.

The news reports earlier this year featured reactions from residents in the selected neighbourhoods going as far as describing the studio apartments for the elderly as places where inhabitants 'just wait to die'.

While I am sure most Singaporeans do not share this view of associating old age with death, it should nevertheless be addressed immediately because the perception does have far-reaching consequences not only to the individual but to society at large.

In this particular episode, it was about locating elderly-related developments in the estates; perhaps in future it could be negative stereotyping of older workers being lazy and unproductive.

Finally, how does one go about nipping ageism in the bud?

It begins at home through simple actions such as children interacting with older members of the family such as grandparents. Such interactions allow opportunities to form positive images and to correct negative stereotypes before they become entrenched, especially among the young.

At the societal level, there is a need to promote positive images of ageing either through public education programmes or intergenerational activities.

Mainstream media must also be sensitive to any negative age stereotyping. Where possible, messaging should be about the celebration of age and recognition of contributions from the elderly.

The recent announcement of locating essential facilities for the elderly in the areas where residents had voiced their objections is the right thing to do in the light of the demographic developments to come. More specifically, the incident suggests that ageism is rising in Singapore and must be dealt with now rather than later.

It is an issue that not only concerns the old but the young in society. Growing old is not a sin.

The writer is a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.