

Healthy Ageing –

Strengthen Community Action

Nelson CHOW

The University of Hong Kong

(I) Traditional ways of promoting the concept of healthy ageing at the community level:

The concept of healthy ageing did not exist in the past as it was unusual for a person to live beyond 70 years of age before the Twentieth Century. To be old was at the same time perceived to be frail and old age was therefore a period in which ill health was inevitable. Hence, greater stress was placed on respecting elderly people rather than the promotion of healthy ageing. In Hong Kong, traditional community activities to promote the concept of respecting old age can be seen as comprising the following:

- (1) Community activities organized to promote the concept of respecting old age include: holding community feasts for elderly people, distributing gifts at special occasions, conducting ceremonies to honour elderly people.
- (2) Community activities organized to enhance the lives of elderly people include: picnics, Cantonese opera, sports and recreational activities, etc.
- (3) Elderly festival: The third Sunday of November has been

designated since the late 1980s as the Elderly Day by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service and activities at the community level are organized to promote public concern for the elderly.

However, notwithstanding the good intentions of the above activities, they have generally failed to make an impact on the public's respect for old age for two reasons:

- (1) The activities have been organized FOR elderly people, resulting in an image of the elderly as receivers of help and assistance. In some occasions, inconsiderate arrangements, like requiring elderly people to wait in open area for their turns to receive gifts, have made the elderly appear very greedy, further tarnishing their public image.
- (2) The activities have failed to improve the role and status of the elderly as the latter are often placed in a subordinate position, as targets of support and concern. In fact, very often the role and status of the elderly have further been eroded, both within the family and in the wider community.

(II) Recent community actions to promote healthy ageing:

The concept of healthy ageing has only been put forward in recent years. It was first perceived in the 1980s that as people lived longer, it was imperative for them to live healthily, not only physically but also socially and psychologically. In Hong Kong, actions to promote the concept of healthy ageing at the community level can be seen as comprising the following:

- (1) Elderly people as volunteers: Instead of receiving help, elderly people are urged to render services for other people as volunteers.
- (2) Empowering the elderly – elderly people are empowered through (a) the adoption of a community work approach; (b) the emphasis on political advocacy; (c) the enhancement of political education and political skills for the elderly; and (d) the promotion of senior citizens coalitions. (See article by P.K. Kam in *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*).

Limitations of the above community actions:

- (1) The volunteer services provided by elderly people, though valuable, are often limited in range and scope. Elderly volunteers, limited by their educational backgrounds, often lack the appropriate skills and knowledge.
- (2) The empowerment of the elderly often represents a wish of the social workers working with the elderly, rather than a desire of the elderly themselves to be empowered. Tactics employed to empower the elderly, such as those to fight for their housing and social security rights, are often ones best known to social workers but not necessarily felt comfortable by the elderly themselves. In other words, the wishes of the elderly have often not been respected in actions to empower them.

**(III) Strategies to promote the concept of healthy ageing
at the community level:**

Three strategies are proposed below as Hong Kong moves from a society in which respecting old age is stressed to one that

emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of elderly people as members of the society:

- (1) As the concept of healthy ageing is a value to be held dear by the people, its promotion must involve long-term community action, like anti-corruption campaigns.
- (2) As an overall objective, community actions must aim at improving the position of the elderly through the provision of opportunities for elderly people to exercise their choices and to be independent. Emphasis must also be placed on the contributions that elderly people can make towards their families and in the wider community. Elderly people should be presented as members of the society who have their own rights and responsibilities.
- (3) To enhance the role and status of the elderly, elderly people should be encouraged to adopt a healthy life-style. Public education should also promote the idea that elderly people could only live healthily when they are given the rightful place in society and not regarded as a “burden”.
- (4) Special attention should be given to the needs of elderly

women as they are often the most neglected group. In fact, the promotion of healthy ageing will not succeed if the plight of elderly women is not taken into special consideration.

- (5) It should be recognized that a secure income in old age is most essential to healthy ageing. At the moment, elderly women who have been housewives are most vulnerable, financially, as they can never establish a MPF account. Consideration should be given to the setting up of a non-contributory, non-means-tested and publicly financed pension for this group of elderly women.