



Christian Medical and
Dental Fellowship
of Australia

AGEISM

There is much in the media today about racism and sexism but very little about the most widespread, insidious, illegal, and yet the most socially accepted of any prejudice-ageism.

Ageism is defined as stereotyping, prejudice or discrimination toward people on the basis of age. It is an increasing international concern with important health implications. A substantial and growing body of research shows that ageism toward our older citizens is highly prevalent across countries and the scope of this problem is expected to grow with the global population aging. Research is also exhibiting that negative attitudes toward aging pose a significant risk to health and well-being in later years. Negative attitudes toward aging contributes to mortality risk, poor functional health, slower recovery from illness and poor mental health.

Ageism among health care professionals can also result in discriminatory practices that place older people at risk. Studies have found negative attitudes toward older people and old age among doctors, medical students and nurses.^{1/2} Such attitudes can lead to practical consequences for older patients, as assumptions regarding functional and cognitive decline leads to more limited provision of medical information, withholding certain treatment options, and exclusion from clinical trials. Ageist attitudes have also been found among mental health practitioners (such as assuming that symptoms such as depression or decreased cognition are normal among older people), which in turn may restrict access to treatments and care. It could also encourage euthanasia and physician assisted suicide of our older citizens.

Ageism also promotes other form of discrimination including the social exclusion of older persons from meaningful roles and relationships which in turn has been identified as a chronic stressor for older people with negative impacts on mental and physical health. Ageist attitudes at an institutional and governmental level also impacts on the development of health policies that would benefit older people.

Christian response to Ageism.

God's word condemns discrimination of any kind, particularly among believers. Jesus reveals that the greatest commands are to love the Lord with our whole heart and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31). The Lord himself "shows no favouritism" (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). In contrast to the rampant ageism in our society, the Bible honours age because God places high value on wisdom. Wisdom belongs to the aged, and understanding to the old" (Proverbs 16:31). "Stand up in the presence of the elderly and show respect for the aged. Fear your God. I am your Lord" (Leviticus 19:32). It seems that respecting one's elders goes hand-in-hand with respect for the Lord Himself. Paul's instruction to Timothy was, "Never speak harshly to an older man, but appeal to him

respectfully as you would to your own father...Treat older women as you would your mother..." (1 Timothy 5:1-2).

CMDFA opposes ageism in healthcare and values life whatever the age of our patients.

References:

1. Lewy S.R. 'Toward reducing ageism: PEACE model', The Gerontologist (2018); 58(2), 226-232
2. Economist Intelligence Unit Report, 'Healthcare strategies for an ageing society', The Economist - London (2009)

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