

525

STATE LIBRARY OF NEW SOUTH WALES  
PUBLIC LIBRARIES DIVISION  
SEMINAR ON LIBRARY SERVICES TO THE AGED  
BURWOOD, SYDNEY, FRIDAY 25 MAY 1984  
OPENING ADDRESS

LIBRARIES FOR THE AGED

May 1984

STATE LIBRARY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

PUBLIC LIBRARIES DIVISION

SEMINAR ON LIBRARY SERVICES TO THE AGED

BURWOOD, SYDNEY, FRIDAY 25 MAY 1984

OPENING ADDRESS

LIBRARIES FOR THE AGED

Hon Justice MD Kirby CMG

Member of the Library Council of New South Wales

I welcome the opportunity to open this conference. It comes at a time when changes to the constitution of Australian society require a thorough overhaul of many of our public services, including library services in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Among these basic changes, going on in our country, are:

- . the growing proportion of the aged population with special needs and disabilities to be catered for in libraries;
- . the growing numbers of people retiring early with prolonged leisure to be filled in;
- . the growing proportion of the population for whom regular employment would be an exception because of technological and structural changes and the reduction of routine work because of computerisation;
- . the impact of the information technology revolution on library services.

In New South Wales the Premier (Mr NK Wran) has specifically earmarked \$1million to be spent on library services for the aged. This laudable government decision means that, for the first time, many librarians are reassessing the services they provide for older members of the community. This conference has been organised to stimulate librarians to think about new directions and services suitable for an ageing population in Australia. The extent of the demographic shift is not yet fully appreciated. Its political and social implications are yet to be realised.

A recent two-year study on the aged in Australia by the Australian National University concluded that not only are there more old people but thanks to superannuation, smaller families, careful investment, prolonged prosperity and improved medical care, many members of our older population are getting healthier and wealthier. Another recent report, from the United States, indicates that there are 32 000 in that country 100 years or older. Three-quarters of these people are women. The middle-aged and elderly are also the fastest growing segments of the population of Australia. Since zero population growth came upon us in the 1960s, the numbers of the young in Australia are dwindling, comparatively. The fastest growing group are those between 35 and 44 — the World War II baby boom. Australia has been an atypical Western country for the last 30 years because of the influx of migrants of younger age and younger families. But now we are rejoining the pattern of other Western communities. This is the long forecast ageing of Australia. Nearly 9% of the Australian population is now over 65. Before the age of 65, 52% of men have retired. This proportion increases rapidly with increasing age. 80% of all men and 95% of all women over the age of 65 are retired. At 65 an average man can expect to live another 15 years. Women can expect to live 20 years. There has been little change in adult mortality of the over-65 group in the past 50 years. But in times gone by, early compulsory retirement was less common than today. Nowadays people can look forward to 15 to 20 years of retirement, on average a fifth of their lifetime. Twice as many people between 55 to 64 years suffer redundancy than those in the 20 to 24 year old group. The Poverty Inquiry has shown that many among the very old in Australia are also very poor. As a compassionate society, we should be doing more to fill the long leisure hours of this large and growing proportion of our population. Television and video cassette recorders provide easy stimulus. But many of our older population tire of repeat cowboy shows and violent American gun duels. 'Perfect Match' may be a fascinating exercise in nostalgia for a time. But many older people will question its immediate relevance to them. And this is where a good book comes in. Yet libraries must adjust their facilities and services if they are to attract the growing ageing population to the world of books.

There has been very little research on the provision of library services for the aged in Australia. In 1979 a major study by Williamson and Stayner<sup>2</sup> was conducted in the two Melbourne suburbs of Ringwood and Croydon, concerning the library needs of people over 65 years. The study showed the necessity to take into account a number of special factors in this older population:

- . it has higher levels of functional illiteracy;
- . it has considerably lower levels in extended schooling or higher education. According to the Census, 35% of the population over 65 had left school at 14 years of age compared with 18% of the population between 14 and 64;

for aged persons to get into libraries and to use them physical localities need frequently to be changed;

- . the interests of older readers tend to be different because of different life experience and current needs. For example, books on employment are of relatively little interest. Books on housing and local facilities are of more interest;
- . new means must be found to inform older citizens of local library facilities. Notices to ratepayers may not do so, because many pensioners pay no rates;
- . new places must be found for advertising library services. The most frequently mentioned suitable place was the doctors' waiting room or an information section in local papers;
- . large print books and other facilities specially adapted to the common disabilities of age need to be 'stepped up'.

In the past some libraries have been more concerned with appearances than with accessibility. Too many libraries have sacrificed accessibility on the altar of an impressive building. The magnificent stone stairway in front of the State Library in Sydney is an architectural inspiration. But it requires an old or handicapped person to mount 11 solid steps. It is also more than a little daunting to the young, inexperienced and shy. It would take a remarkably healthy and intrepid older reader to find their way into the State Library. Many do. But many do not. Fortunately the new library building now being erected in Macquarie Street will exhibit a modern insistence on public accessibility, new facilities and up to date technology.

As in the Melbourne survey of older readers, a number of positive suggestions could be made for improvement of library facilities for the old. These include:

- . the establishment of planning committees including elderly people;
- . the provision of interpreters and more community language books for the migrant aged;
- . pamphlets with phone numbers and details of services, to be available at supermarkets, doctors' waiting rooms etc;
- . an increase in large print facilities;
- . the appointment of local Council community officers to provide special leisure facilities for the aged;
- . there should be publicity about facilities in local papers and radio;
- . purchasing policy should be altered to reflect the priority interests of older readers;
- . the provision of mobile library facilities to bring suitable books to the bedridden and immobile reader.

I know this seminar will be addressing these issues, or some of them. I have much pleasure in opening the seminar. The State Library Council of New South Wales will consider most closely Ms Woodward's report on your deliberations.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cf Pensions After 2000 : A Granny Crisis is Coming, in The Economist, 19 May 1984, 55.
2. K Williamson and R Stayner, 'Information and Library Needs of the Aged', in The Australian Library Journal, Vol 29, No 4 (November 1980), 188.