



COTA Over 50s
Brenton Holmes
National Policy Research Officer

Dr. Geoffrey Bird
Executive Director
National Policy Office

AGEING AND THE INVISIBLE SUITCASE

The Lieutenant Governor of South Australia, Hieu Van Le, is a remarkable man. He was one of the first Vietnamese boat people to reach Australia's shores some 30 years ago. He arrived with nothing but what he called in a recent speech his 'invisible suitcase' of Vietnamese language, history and culture. Although he has risen to prominence as an Australia citizen and office bearer, and has enjoyed great success professionally and financially, he still carries with him his precious invisible suitcase.

It struck me that all migrants must have such an invisible suitcase containing those special attributes of their heritage that have helped forge their identity and shape their world view. In various ways, they have drawn on resources from the suitcase to help them find their way in their new lives in Australia, and to connect with others of similar background who share Australia as their new homeland.

And the more I thought about it, I decided that all of us journey towards old age with our very own invisible suitcase of memories and dreams – some delightful, some painful – and of hopes and plans that will make our senior years a rich and rewarding experience.

We must also admit, of course, that growing older is a somewhat risky business. We may become frail and unwell. Discomfort may be a constant companion, and loneliness may lead to depression and despair. But for many of us – hopefully most of us – our senior years will be blessed with time to do things that are important to us. We will perhaps be able to travel, to renew our education, to reconnect with friends, strengthen our relationships with families and grandchildren, and contribute to our communities as volunteers or workers or mentors.

COTA Over 50s is the national peak policy and advocacy organisation whose members are eight State and Territory-based entities — Councils on the Ageing in NSW, Victoria, Tasmania, Western Australia, South Australia, ACT, Queensland and the Northern Territory. COTA Over 50s serves the interests of older Australians by articulating and advocating to government policies that will enable seniors to 'age well' and to 'age in place' – because these are the most widely shared aspirations of older Australians, whatever their cultural or linguistic background.

You won't be surprised to know that we are being very active around issues of pension levels and housing affordability at the moment.

Ageing well and in place is about being able to make decisions and undertake activities with the maximum possible degree of independence from a secure material and social base. It is about living in your house with a sufficient degree of comfort, and moving around your community with relative ease. It is about being able to be largely self-reliant, pursuing one's interests, keeping oneself healthy and engaged – physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually.

Older Australians are a diverse group in every sense of the word. In their lifestyles, political allegiances, religious affiliations, incomes and attitudes, they are as diverse as the rest of the population. In cultural and linguistic terms we know that by 2011, nearly 23% of Australia's seniors – and one in every five people aged 80 and over - will be from CALD backgrounds. This diversity must be taken into account in the policies that are developed and the services that are implemented to respond to Australia's ageing demographic.

While individuals should not be defined solely according to their cultural and linguistic background, these are very important elements of the identities and relationships that people have within their communities. They also play a large role in determining the various expectations and responsibilities that attach to being an elder in a family or community, or being a younger member in that group. I am also told that as one becomes very old, it is not unusual for one's traditional language to return as a significant aspect of communication.

This is why it is very important that governments and service providers take into proper consideration what Australians from CALD backgrounds carry with them in their invisible suitcases. There are now many residential aged care providers that are organised around the needs and preferences of particular ethnic communities, drawing support from those communities and helping CALD seniors to age well in ways that matter to them. There is already a shortage of such facilities, and the demand will no doubt only increase.

COTA Over 50s has always been a strong advocate of the provision of community-based support for Australia's seniors, where services are delivered locally, rather than people having to relocate to receive services. The community sector, with its diverse array of organisations, is well placed to assist in this respect. It is not a matter of the community sector being burdened with the task of seniors' service delivery, but rather of governments supporting and funding community organisations to provide those services that they are best placed to deliver. For CALD Australians, such arrangements are particularly desirable.

Another important consideration is ensuring that members of CALD communities are well informed about their entitlements as seniors, and are able to understand and access the kinds of support that is available from mainstream services. CALD seniors must not have to rely

merely on targeted 'add-ons' to mainstream services, but should enjoy integrated access to services as a citizen like any other. This can occur if mainstream services have developed the links and partnerships with CALD communities and their organisations that enable regular dialogue and engagement.

Only through such engagement can mainstream service providers ensure that their resources and training is culturally appropriate, or that levels of awareness about issues and support – from digital communications to dementia – are commensurate with those across the population as a whole.

Many of the Councils on the Ageing already have solid links with community-based organisations whose members belong to specific ethnic communities. But we can always improve our levels of engagement by thinking about how we communicate COTA policies and activities, and how we draw upon the rich resources of imagination, skill and goodwill that abound in our CALD communities.

I suspect that, by the time we are seniors, we have actually learned a thing or two about the diversity of human kind. We know that no particular group or community has all the answers, but that if we work together we can share our wisdom and perhaps develop new answers that make ageing well an even more satisfying experience. The resources and the ingredients are already there, in the invisible suitcases where each of us stores what really matters to us. If we looked into each other's suitcases we would have treasure to share.

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