



Becoming Visible:

Older People as Active Participants in the Community and in Long-term Care Settings

“The only difference between older and younger people is time”. This reminder that age should not define who we are came from Prof Aina Fawcett-Henesy (World Health Organisation) at the Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre (TCD) and the Changing Ageing Partnership of Queen’s University Belfast and Age NI’s conference on older people’s participation in society and the barriers preventing this.

Plenary speaker Prof James Nazroo (University of Manchester) suggested that the longer life span has given older people more opportunities to enjoy life. However, poverty and ill-health prevent many older people from active engagement; the wealthiest older people are more likely to volunteer and be socially engaged, and thus have a better quality of life. Mary Davis (Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia) and Anne O’Reilly (Age NI) also highlighted the “Catch-22” situation they faced in engaging socially excluded older people from volunteering; because socially isolated older people use few services, contacting them in the first place can prove challenging.

Maev-Ann Wren, health policy journalist and TCD PhD student estimated that 11,000 carers aged 70 and over may help keep 1,600 older people out of residential care annually but highlighted the toll that caring can place on older carers. In response, Helen Ferguson (Carers NI) called for more support for unpaid carers.

On the second day of the conference, Prof Marian Barnes (University of Brighton) encouraged official policy makers to be more innovative in listening to the views of older people, and not to ignore emotional responses from older people. Eleanor Edmond (Alzheimer Society of Ireland) suggested that developing close and meaningful relationships and using non-verbal prompts, art and music can help to ensure the needs and wishes of people with dementia are met.

Four older women active in promoting the rights of older people, Sylvia Meehan, Nancy Tynan, Anne Watson and Sue McCrory, gave their reflections of issues covered in the conference, and spoke about the personal rewards that participation in society can give.

Award-winning TCD poet Prof Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin closed the conference with a poetry reading. Her poem 'Vertigo' [from *The Sun-Fish*, Gallery Press, 2009], about a visit by a woman and her two daughters to Lough Derg, provided a vivid account of inter-generational solidarity; in response to their mother’s desire to walk the pilgrimage barefoot, the two daughters helped their mother “...like armed angels guarding each side of the path, to the edge, where everything pours away”.

See www.sparc.tcd.ie/newsAndEvents/Conf2010Output.php for more details on the conference.