

Editorial

The Welfare of the Elderly

by *A. A. Sandosham*

IN THE editorial column of the Medical Journal of Malaysia we had occasion to broach the subject matter of the increasing life span of Malaysians in 1966. The topic came up for discussion again at the International Gerontological Symposium held in Singapore in February this year.

Statistics

According to available statistical information the expectation of life of the average Malaysian has been increasing steadily over the past decades and is now 67.2 years compared to 57 twenty years ago. There is every prospect of this tendency continuing over the years with the country's sound economy leading to higher living standards, better nutrition and the improving health services.

Retirement

The retiring age in Government service here is 55 at which age he may expect to live for another 21.4 years. At 55 a man is often still physically and mentally capable of carrying out his duties efficiently and to condemn him as unfit for further service is grossly unjust and a loss to society.

In most advanced countries there is a fuller recognition of the contribution that the older people can make to the life of the community and a further raising of the present retiring age of 65 is being seriously considered. A reappraisal of our attitudes towards retirement is called for. To be abruptly cut off from his livelihood and converted overnight from a work oriented person to that of an unoccupied old man is a most traumatic experience and calls for considerable powers of adjustment. Post-retirement

problems are becoming a growing concern in the country today. The thought of getting up in the morning not knowing what he is going to do can be most frustrating.

Community Attitude

The attitude of the community towards their old folks has varied with different circumstances and different cultures and has been undergoing changes continuously. Early nomadic tribes finding their elders no longer productive and useful and too heavy a burden, abandoned them to die. The old folks fared better in settled agricultural communities. In ancient China the old people were held in veneration and even after death were revered as honourable ancestors. In the industrialised and materialistic West the accent has been on youth.

Traditionally, the old folks in the Orient have been housed and cared for by their children. This has been true for Malaysia but the increasing westernisation in outlook and the rapid rate of urbanisation and industrialisation in the country are beginning to change that state of affairs. The multigeneration households are rapidly disappearing and the old folks are finding themselves more and more dependent on themselves. Many modern countries accept their responsibility to support the aged in dignity and comfort by providing adequate old age pensions and properly-run old folks' homes.

A Society for the Welfare of the Elderly

'Old folks' conjures up the idea of an impoverished, debilitated and depressed group of people. In reality, only a small fraction of old

people are or ought to be confined to nursing homes and institutions. Government and various charitable organisations cater for this group.

The other elderly people will fall into two categories, the rich and the middle-income groups. The rich old person can fend for himself providing himself with the necessary geriatric care and facilities. The middle-income group will constitute a big majority and will require assistance.

In Western countries there exists a large number of organisations, sponsored both by Government and the public, to cater for this group. In Malaysia a Society for the Welfare of the Elderly can achieve much to study their needs and promote measures for their well-being. The membership of the Society need not be confined to the aged, although self help should be encouraged. The objective of the Society would be, not to increase the average life span, but to enable individuals to remain healthy and relatively active during their final years. Healthy old age can be a most satisfying period of life. An elderly person should be able to look back with satisfaction on a lifetime of work, recreation and interests; its friendships and its affectionate family relationships. It should be a period of tranquility when the "rat race" has ceased and when one can have time to think and to do those things formerly denied by lack of time and other commitments.

Retirement

One reason for post-retirement difficulties is the lack of preparation for the fundamental life changes involved. The Society could help popularise the idea and help to run pre-retirement classes with the object of improving attitudes towards the coming change and preparing the individual for the new life. He could be taught to develop hobbies and train himself for the sort of jobs that may be available and that he was suited to undertake. The Society could make large employers, like the Government, to realise that their responsibilities do not cease with the retirement of their employees. It could also help arouse the social conscience of the public which is sadly lacking today. A re-employ-

ment bureau could be set up by the Society to maintain a register of people trained in one skill or another and secure part-time jobs for retired people. They could even join a voluntary agency and give free service.

Housing

The Society should be able to assist with the problem of residence for the elderly. The multi-generation households are rapidly disappearing. Ideally old couples who can maintain themselves should live independently in their own homes. The Society could give advice on the type, size and the furnishing of the bungalow specially adapted to the limitations and handicaps of the elderly. Boarding out for single old folks is a possibility and the Society could assist by careful placement and matching of hosts and boarders. The next best thing to living in their own homes is independence within a group in Grouped Dwellings or Sheltered Houses. The Society could design a colony with houses fitted to meet the requirements of old folks and with communal facilities.

Clubs

The Society may be able to organise the visiting of lonely and housebound old folks by volunteers. It could also carry out a neighbourhood survey and organise a Club where groups of elderly people, leisured by retirement could foregather during the day to talk, play cards, read or smoke in amiable silence according to need. The Society could organise a volunteer transport system for those requiring it.

Education

Prevention is better than treatment. Older people themselves have to be educated by disseminating information by Newsletters, magazines, etc. on the maintenance of health e.g. accident prevention. This could be undertaken by the Society.

Thus, it would appear a Society for the Welfare of the Elderly will have a useful role to play in Malaysia and we recommend its formation.