

## **Social Support Enhances Healthcare Utilisation by Older Adults**

*Research unveiled at Annual ROSA Symposium on Successful Ageing highlights that social and physical context influence the healthcare utilisation patterns of older adults*

**Singapore, 1 November 2022 (Tuesday)** – SMU’s [Centre for Research on Successful Ageing \(ROSA\)](#) has found that it is crucial to think of ‘health capital’ not just in biomedical terms, but also in terms of building the social resources and resilience of Singaporeans as a means of supporting their healthcare needs. The findings, unveiled and debated at the annual ROSA Symposium on Successful Ageing, highlight the importance of closely studying a whole-of-society approach in enabling preventive approaches to healthcare.

“Because a long lifespan may not equate to a high quality of life, it’s important to examine how we can improve healthspan. Given Singapore’s rapidly ageing population, we can’t afford to let this discussion take a backseat. We hope that understanding and deploying psychosocial interventions, as a whole-of-society approach, can speak about the need to understand the interplay of emotional and physical health, and to ultimately enhance the effectiveness of Healthier SG,” said **Professor Paulin Straughan, Director, ROSA**.

### **Healthcare utilisation**

[Healthier SG](#) is the Singapore Ministry of Health’s multi-year strategy to transform the way that healthcare is delivered, by shifting the emphasis from reactively caring for those who are already sick, to proactively preventing individuals from falling ill.

Findings from ROSA’s latest study suggest that social factors can and do work to influence healthcare utilisation by older adults. Physical healthcare accessibility is important in encouraging middle-aged and older adults to visit a doctor when in need of health advice, but social support is equally key. ROSA’s research suggests that having strong and intimate social networks is an important factor in encouraging older adults to visit a doctor when in need of healthcare advice.

According to Associate Professor Ding Yew Yoong, Executive Director, Geriatric Education and Research Institute, preventing functional decline among older adults in the COVID-19 era requires targeted efforts to strengthen both intrinsic capacity and extrinsic environments.

“One unexpected outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has foregrounded the crucial role of supporting environments, such as social relationships, health-social services, and public policies, in promoting the well-being of older persons. A whole-of-society approach is needed to tailor these supports to the unique needs of our older population, in addition to developing and maintaining their physical and mental capacities. Together, this will go a long way in advancing healthy ageing in Singapore,” said **Associate Professor Ding**.

### **The Singapore Life Panel (SLP): A treasure trove of data on Singapore’s older adults**

ROSA’s research uses data from the [Singapore Life Panel®](#), a population representative monthly survey of Singaporeans aged 56-75 (inclusive) that has been conducted since 2015. The SLP has an average response rate of about 7,200 respondents per month and is web-based.

By 2050, almost one in two individuals in Singapore is expected to be aged 65 and above. ROSA's long-term studies serve to uncover findings that shed light on the optimal ways to best provide for the well-being of older adults in Singapore and promote successful ageing.

Housed in SMU, ROSA's research underscores SMU's strategic priority area of [Sustainable Living](#). Through this area of focus, the University seeks to drive solutions in managing climate change and sustainable city living, enhancing quality of life.

The Annual ROSA Symposium on Successful Ageing is a platform which convenes members from academia, government and the philanthropic sector, who are working together to address the societal challenge and opportunity that ageing represents. Themed "Advancing Healthy Ageing – Nurturing the Health Capital of Older Adults", the 2022 hybrid event covered topics on improving the intrinsic capacity and extrinsic environments of older adults, the importance of wider care and social context and adequate income insurance to deal with unexpected health shocks that low SES workers may face. For the first time, 40 members from ROSA's Singapore Life Panel® attended the Symposium as well.

The Symposium was made possible with the generous support of The Ngee Ann Kongsi.

Please refer to the Annex for a summary of the key findings and ideas presented at the Symposium.

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### **About the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA)**

ROSA is a multidisciplinary research centre based in SMU. It was established with an MOE Tier 3 social sciences research grant, as well as the generous support of The Ngee Ann Kongsi. Research at ROSA seeks to define and measure a holistic construct of well-being and to identify the factors that impact Singaporeans' well-being as they progress through the later phases of life. Through close collaboration with government and other partner agencies, ROSA also aims to translate research insights into policy innovations that advance the well-being of older adults holistically and promote successful ageing in Singapore. ROSA brings together a diverse team of leading international and local researchers in ageing and age-related issues from various disciplines. Through empirical evidence derived from a longitudinal methodological approach, the multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research team advances propositions that promote successful ageing in Singapore.

### **About Singapore Management University**

Established in 2000, Singapore Management University (SMU) is recognised for its disciplinary and multi-disciplinary research that address issues of global relevance, impacting business, government, and society. Its distinctive education, incorporating innovative experiential learning, aims to nurture global citizens, entrepreneurs and change agents. With more than 12,000 students, SMU offers a wide range of bachelors, masters and PhD degree programmes in the disciplinary areas associated with six of its eight schools - Accountancy, Business, Computing, Economics, Law and Social Sciences. Its seventh school, the SMU College of Integrative Studies, offers degree programmes in deep, integrative interdisciplinary education. The College of Graduate Research Studies, SMU's eighth school, enhances integration and interdisciplinarity across the various SMU postgraduate research programmes that will enable our students to gain a holistic learning experience and well-grounded approach to their research. SMU also offers a growing number of executive development and continuing education programmes. Through its city campus, SMU focuses on making meaningful impact on Singapore and beyond through its partnerships with industry, policy makers and academic institutions. [www.smu.edu.sg](http://www.smu.edu.sg)

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## **ANNEX: SECOND ROSA SYMPOSIUM ON SUCCESSFUL AGEING**

### **Summary of key findings**

#### **1. Strengthening Healthier SG: The importance of a whole-of-society approach**

By Professor [Paulin Straughan](#), Director, ROSA

Population ageing has vast implications for the healthcare needs of Singaporeans. Among these will be the rise in demand for long-term care as greater proportions of the population will be at an increased risk of suffering from chronic health conditions.

In response, the Singapore government has introduced the Healthier SG initiative; a comprehensive overhaul of the primary healthcare system that places greater emphasis on preventive healthcare. It is hoped that through preventive efforts, chronic condition incidence can be reduced despite an ageing population thereby reducing future strain on the healthcare system.

In this presentation, Professor Straughan presents new perspectives on the Healthier SG initiative by highlighting the importance of adopting a whole-of-society approach in enabling preventive approaches to healthcare.

In particular, she highlights the importance of thinking of 'health capital' not just in biomedical terms, but also in terms of building the social resources and resilience of Singaporeans as a means of supporting their healthcare needs.

#### **2. How do health shocks affect health and labour market dynamics, and the socioeconomic-health gradient in older persons?**

By Associate Professor [Seonghoon Kim](#), Deputy Director, ROSA

A significant body of literature has emerged in recent years examining the different ways in which socioeconomic inequalities contribute to or shape health inequalities. In academic discourse, this is commonly referred to as the 'socioeconomic health gradient'.

Of particular interest to researchers has been the question of how this gradient differs over the life course – while socioeconomic disparities in health have been documented among younger populations, do they persist in older age, or do they 'level out' and disappear over time? Such discussions have important consequences for policy, especially in terms of developing interventions to address health inequalities and outcomes among older adults, as well as in terms of the relevance and impact of preventive healthcare approaches.

Associate Professor Kim presents his original research on this topic that provides additional insight into the complex interplay between socioeconomic and health inequalities in older age. In particular, his research reveals that ill-health has greater negative consequences for the work activity of older adults from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in Singapore, relative to those of higher SES. Subsequent implications of this and contributing factors will then be discussed.

### **3. Healthy ageing in the COVID-19 era**

By Associate Professor Ding Yew Yoong, Executive Director, Geriatric Education and Research Institute

In 2015, WHO proposed a public health framework for healthy ageing which revolves around the functional ability of older adults. It introduced the concept of intrinsic capacity which is the composite of an individual's physical and mental capacities, while highlighting extrinsic environments which are factors in the context of an individual's life including the built environment, supporting relationships, health and social services, and public policies.

Intrinsic capacity, extrinsic environments, and their interaction act to influence functional ability. Through the lens of healthy ageing, challenges to maintaining functional ability among older adults are illustrated by the adverse impact of COVID-19 on intrinsic capacity and extrinsic environments. Strategies to address this impact provide a roadmap for preventing functional decline among older adults in the COVID-19 era and beyond.

### **4. Lifelong learning and mental well-being of older adults in Singapore**

By Associate Professor Fang Zheng, Deputy Director, Office of Graduate Studies, Singapore University of Social Sciences

Singapore has one of the fastest rates of growth in the ageing populations in the world. As society ages, it is important to develop an ecosystem of early intervention and support for healthy ageing, particularly the mental and emotional health of the elderly.

As ageing population will lead to sharp increases in the cost of healthcare, which raises the tax burden on the young, promoting the "health-span" of seniors and their mental wellbeing will be crucial from the policy perspective and for long-term sustainability of public services.

This study examines whether lifelong learning may influence the mental wellbeing of the elderly and their perceived value of life. The study constructs a Multidimensional Wellbeing Index (MWI) with following desirable properties associated with index number analysis to capture the overall subjective and mental well-being of seniors. It find that negative attitudes towards lifelong learning are associated with poorer mental wellbeing and physical health. It is important to emphasize that our work does not imply causal analysis, but offers preliminary evidence of the positive influence that lifelong learning might have on ageing.

### **5. Profiles of social activity and depression trajectories post-lockdown**

By Mr Jonathan Chia, PhD Candidate, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University

Depression prevalence has witnessed considerable increase over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, owing to prolonged and simultaneous exposures to various stressors. Among older adults in particular, loneliness and social isolation exacerbated the toll that pandemic regulations exacted on mental health. However, with the removal of most restrictions in 2022, it is important to ask how older adults are recovering and whether some are rebounding more or less quickly than others. Using latent profile analyses, the current study classified older adults based on how frequently they

engage in several social activities. Results indicated that social activity patterns were associated with differences in baseline depression but were mostly similar in their recovery over time. One important exception is that older adults who are broadly inactive tended to recover more slowly, even after accounting for demographic factors, personality, activities of daily living (ADL) and pre-pandemic negative affect. Scientific and practical implications of these findings will be discussed.

## **6. The care and research challenges of multimorbidity, polypharmacy and ageing**

By Professor Bruce Guthrie, Director of the Advanced Care Research Centre (ACRC), University of Edinburgh

*[Keynote lecture at ROSA Symposium]* Life expectancy in most countries continues to increase, but population ageing is also accompanied by increases in the proportion of people with multimorbidity, polypharmacy and frailty. The shift away from a focus on single conditions means there is a need for more multi- and inter-disciplinary working in both health and social care *and* in research.

This presentation will therefore firstly describe epidemiological and interventional research in multimorbidity and polypharmacy, including the limitations of current clinical evidence in guiding treatment decisions, and the importance of wider care and social context in mediating the benefits of treatment (for example, continuity of care and social support).

Secondly, the presentation will explore what kinds of research and researchers we need to better understand and address this societal challenge.

## **7. Health capacity to work among older Japanese people**

By Professor Takashi Oshio, Institute of Economic Research, Hitotsubashi University

In his presentation, Professor Oshio will discuss how much longer older Japanese people can work, judging by their health status. There are two established approaches to answering this question: the Milligan and Wise (MW) method and the Cutler, Meara, and Richards-Shubik (CMR) method. The MW method examines how much people with a given mortality rate today could work if they were to work as those with the same mortality rate in the past. The CMR method examines how much people with a given level of health could work as much as their younger counterparts in similar health.

Professor Oshio demonstrates how both models show a substantial amount of additional (i.e., untapped) capacity to work among older Japanese people. His results suggest that we can at least partly mitigate pressures from ageing population by encouraging older people to work longer, although there are many issues to be addressed.