



Lillian Thompson Austen M.A., LL.

Last year, the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Crime Prevention Council, in conjunction with the New South Wales Police Department, conducted a Seminar on "Crime and the Elderly". One of the papers presented to that Seminar was written by Lillian Thompson Austen M.A., LL.B., a Sydney Magistrate. We thank her for her permission to reproduce it here.

Mrs Thompson Austen attended school at Methodist Ladies College, Hawthorn, Victoria, and then trained as a nurse at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne. A career change, some time later, saw her become a counsellor with the Marriage Guidance Council of New South Wales. As her children grew older, she returned to study. She graduated from the University of New South Wales in 1980 with degrees in Arts and Law. She spent five years as a practising barrister and then became the first woman barrister to be appointed to the Local Court. Her concern for others is demonstrated in her recent completion of a Master of Arts degree in Women's Studies and in the content of this paper.

CRIME AND



THE ELDERLY

By Lillian Thompson Austen M.A., LL.B.

One of the troubles with the world is we are all at different stages of development.

This is illustrated by the concept that life is but a circle and the end of all our endeavours will be to arrive back where we started.

Shakespeare in "As You Like It" had this to say about old age:

"Last scene of all
That ends this strange eventful history
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

That was in Shakespeare's day and while human nature is the same, high technology and modern developments have changed the scene. People are living longer; (the proportion of our population aged 65 and over has increased from 4% in 1901 to 10.5% in 1986 and is projected to reach 16% by 2025) are generally better educated and certainly more mobile. While this brings privileges and opportunities it also brings problems.

The aged are likely to be the victims of crime such as hand-bag snatching (fossil farming as it is called by the crude drug culture), burglary, fraud and con men.

At this point I would like to recommend the excellent book produced by the Community Relations Bureau of the N.S.W. Police Dept. It is entitled *Safety Advice for the Elderly* and is full of simple crime prevention tips, and the thrust of the eighties is on **PREVENTION** rather than cure as instanced by **NEIGHBOURHOOD** watch for example.

Prevention for the elderly entails ongoing education programs, raising the pension to 25% of average weekly earnings, prompt indexing, low interest loans to help with home maintenance, the provision of respite services and last, and perhaps the most important of all, the involvement of older people in the decisions that affect them.

It is normal to be in reasonable health, socially active and mentally competent when you are 80 or even 90 years of age.

But the stereotype of helpless old age is so powerful that people discount examples that oppose it and conclude that these are exceptions rather than the rule.

A survey in Brisbane confirmed that the health of 200 aged interviewees was good. This does not mean they were free of chronic disabilities such as less acute hearing and eye sight and muscular problems but, for most of them, these were under control and did not greatly hamper the activities of the aged.

The old people indicated a rather unexpected appreciation of the value of diet and exercise. A majority preferred outdoors to indoors and managed this mostly in the garden, but a surprising number mentioned walking as a daily activity. In other words, they were resisting the myth that to be old is to be physically inactive.

The Walking for Pleasure program here has proved to be a great success. It is important for our aged to get out and about and to be as **street wise** as possible in an attempt to **PREVENT** them being victims of crime.

The myth that the old prefer inactivity has the built in danger of becoming self fulfilling as, after a while, inactivity



becomes not only easier, but preferable. As Shirley Hazzard said, "it is the things we fear most that happen to us." This is the **IRONY** of life. This is the way things are. The theme of this paper is **PREVENTION**; therefore everything must be done to prevent our aged becoming fearful. This way they will less likely be the victims of crime.

It is important accordingly that the self esteem of the elderly be nurtured. The aged in the Brisbane survey were not sick and neither were they inactive. Quite the contrary - their ideal was to be **USEFUL**. This is in direct conflict with the myth that the old - are unproductive members of society. And there were a few too who were still working for pay in the outside world. The aged in this study were productive.

Many of them worked for voluntary organizations often just "knitting for the stalls" as many put it but sometimes much more actively - one 89 year old still drove his own car **DELIVERING** Meals on Wheels to people mostly younger than himself.

In Sydney Local Courts there are aged people involved in the Civil Rehabilitation Committee. This is a voluntary group who assist people, particularly the aged and infirm, in court room matters - procedures as well as defending.

And the aged should be encouraged to keep active physically and mentally. They should be encouraged to take up some course or form of study. Frank Hardy espouses this concept which may be summed up in phrase **USE IT OR LOSE IT**.

Many of the people I have admired have been of retirement age when they did the things for which I admire them. A recent book "The Matriachs" illustrates this point.

It covers the lives of well known people like Phyllis Cilento,



Alice Doyle, Mary Durak and others. And these famous people are just examples of the thousands of people out there achieving or capable of achieving.

In the Brisbane survey, most respondents maintained a reciprocal give and take with their families – in cash, in kind and in services and they contributed as best they could to their own household.

Aunty Clarice 95 cooked evening meals for herself and her 70 year old daughter – herself the proprietor of 3 antique shops in Adelaide.



Another myth is that the old are lonely and neglected by their families. In normal, mentally and emotionally healthy people this is simply not the case.

The most damaging myth of all is the myth that the old become increasingly forgetful to the point where they live in the past and cannot learn anything new – in other words, become mentally defective. The aged, like all of us respond to the social situation.

It is most difficult to pay attention to things in the first place if your routine lacks the stimulation of novelty. It is more difficult to consolidate thoughts and ideas for storage if you lack encouragement to talk them over or reflect on them; it is more difficult to retrieve them promptly if you lack the

stimulation to be quick on the conversation uptake because you live alone **OR** with a partner who understands you so well the words are hardly necessary.

BUT these very understandable difficulties are misinterpreted as an irreversible decline in mental function due entirely to the passage of years.

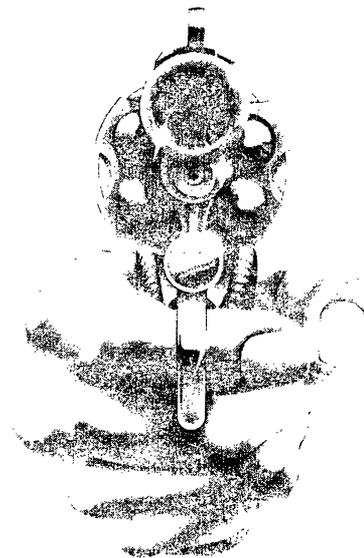
ANXIETY itself is a major cause of forgetfulness and this is why old people need to be counselled. “**THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR BUT FEAR ITSELF**” Thoreau as espoused by Roosevelt.

There is a tremendous need to present another side to the picture besides the well published “epidemic of senile dementia” so often proposed as inevitable because of the aging of our population **BECAUSE** prophecies like this do have a way of becoming self fulfilling.

Old people – and indeed young people too – can become temporarily disoriented and confused as a result of a bereavement, a mugging, a new situation such as being in Court, illness, depression or anxiety. If we – and they – misinterpret symptoms as the first sign of an irreversible decline, that is **JUST** what the temporary disorientation may turn into (an example of this is it is the things we fear most that happen to us).

And the supposed decline is no respecter of age. A 30 year old secretary said she was afraid of losing her job because she was becoming increasingly inarticulate; her boss would ask her for some information and her mind would go blank or she would be unable to think of some perfectly ordinary word. She had a very demanding job and her boss expected a lot of her; she also had a dementing mother in a nursing home.

It was pointed out to her that she had articulated all this at some length and without being troubled by non retrieval of a word. She immediately saw for herself that it was anxiety that was at the root of her problem – that and the fact that her boss had come to expect of her more than **ANYBODY'S** memory could normally deal with. She was reassured.



People, especially **OLD** people, need **REASSURANCE**. They need **HOPE**. They need grounds for rejecting the myth that the lapses of memory happen only to the old, or to the

prematurely senile, and it is no use fighting against it because eventually everybody will lose their memory.

This is **NONSENSE!** And dangerous nonsense, too.

Associated with this myth of fading memory is the equally damaging one that old people cannot learn anything new. (You know you can't teach an old dog new tricks stuff) of course the evidence against this myth is overwhelming as is testified by the eagerness and the success, with which elderly people embrace the learning of anything from canaster to computer science.

Old people must be encouraged to go on developing their potential into old age. There ought to be opportunities for an on-going education. The more aware, the more alert, the more street wise the less likely old people are to be victims of crime.

At a recent conference in Sydney, Professor George Myers summarised three different views about the health, physical and mental, likely to be enjoyed – or endured – by the older members of society. First, there was the optimistic view put forward especially by **Friez and Crapow** in their book **VITALITY AND AGEING**. They argue that there is already evidence that, as more and more of us live to the upper end of the human life-span, the diseases usually associated with age will become more and more concentrated into a brief break down period immediately being death.

Next, there's the opposite view, taken by people like **Kramer and Gruneberg and McKinkley**. These argue that the prolongation of life merely means the prolongation of chronic diseases – what **Isaacs, Langshaw and Neville** have dubbed "the survival of the unfittest".

But there is another view, the "integrated prospective", whose proponents argue that the pattern is NOT pre-set but will be created by dynamic interventions and by interactions between them. They are saying that the future will depend on what we do about it now and later. And what we do about it will, I suggest, depend very largely on whether we are still



shackled by out-dated myths or whether we are prepared to hitch our wagon to a more optimistic star and turn it into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Citizens aged 60 and over expressed the greatest fear of crime. This is particularly unfortunate, as the same survey revealed the objective likelihood of the elderly person becoming the victim of crime to be relatively low, in the three most serious crimes – homicide, rape and aggravated assault. However, in crimes of purse snatching, "strong-arm" robbery and criminal fraud older people rate very high. (Biles 1983)

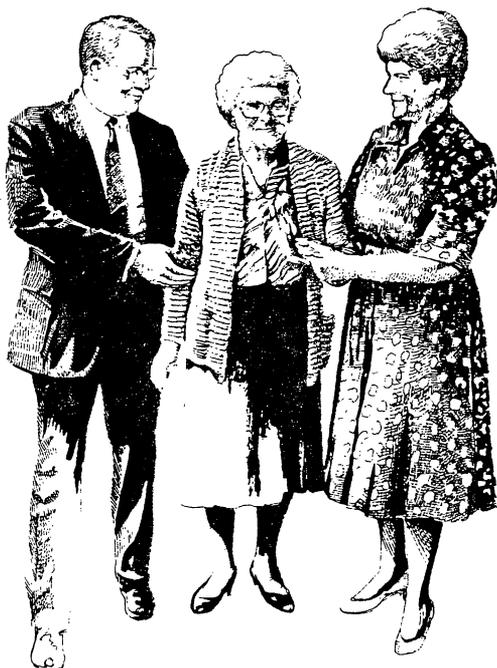
Because of the relative infrequency of major crimes against senior citizens few specialised services to elderly crime victims are available. There does appear to be a need, however, for support and reassurance to elderly persons in general whose **FEAR** of crime detracts from the quality of their lives. A significant contribution could be made by expanded programs designed to reduce the social isolation of Australia's senior citizens.

A good example is being set by various Police Departments in Australia, particularly N.S.W, in developing crime prevention programs for elderly citizens. These persons may be particularly vulnerable to confidence tricksters, to burglars and to juvenile offenders who may try to take advantage of an elderly persons loneliness or physical frailty. This has been recognised for several years and acted on through special police programs for the elderly overseas. In parts of Washington, where there is a substantial concentration of old people, special crime **PREVENTION** and safety lectures are organised for them.

Chief Inspector Page in *Police Life* November 1985 article "Peace of Mind for the Aged" poses this question: "When was the last time you visited an old friend or senior citizen of your community to bring them friendship, support and peace of mind? Such visits are important to your needs as a police member and the needs of these senior citizens."

Also, it is heartening to see increasing numbers of women police officers as they have been conditioned in the nurturing, caring role.

Joy Melville writes in the *New Society*, 6 November 1987. Her article is "Helping Victims Survive" and tells of



CRIME AND THE ELDERLY – Continued

elderly victims of muggings finding support and reassurance at a refuge in Liverpool. These victims were each attacked in their own home and each is too frightened ever to return to their own home.

These are the victims and the awful consequence. However, the theme of this paper is on **PREVENTION** and let me return to the recommendations for **PREVENTION** as espoused by this paper.

Higher pensions, say 25% of average weekly earnings indexed to the cost of living would be most acceptable I am sure – there is nothing like a little money in the pocket to increase one's esteem and one's freedom of action.



Elderly people would avail themselves of low interest loans for home maintenance which is often quite a worry, and they could also afford security devices such as dead locks and

bars on windows. They would welcome respite facilities particularly opportunities for further education to help them be confident and street wise.

And they would all appreciate having a say in decisions that affect their daily lives. This point cannot be over emphasised. Old people generally do not want to be fussed over. They prize their independence highly. They believe in keeping busy and more than that, they want to continue being "useful". People of all ages have the same basic needs – of needing affection, positive regard, stimulation and understanding. We are all the same – the only difference is we are all at different stages of development, at different points on the circle of life.

Let us listen to what our older citizens are saying to us. Let us support any move that will help them maintain their independence, confidence and self esteem and knowledge because this way they are less likely to be the victims of crime.

MRS LILLIAN AUSTEN LCM
3 MARCH 1988

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