



UNLEASHING POTENTIAL

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DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER HENG SWEE KEAT, on how the current view that seniors “impose a crippling burden on society” is a very limiting mindset that needs to change.

STAYING ACTIVE

Our aspiration is that even seniors with physical or cognitive frailty should have the confidence to continue to go out and lead active lives.



DPM HENG, on how health is about physical, mental and social well-being.

Seniors exercising at a community club. The number of healthy years of people in Singapore has gone up from 66.6 years in 1990 to 73.9 years in 2019. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Critical for societies to unlock ‘longevity dividend’: DPM Heng

As people live longer, there must be support for them to lead meaningful, purposeful lives

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A 100-year lifespan for people may well become the norm as life expectancy continues to increase.

This has profound implications for societies and individuals who need to find ways to fund their longer lives, said Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies Heng Swee Keat on Wednesday.

“The key question for all societies is, how we can support our people in leading meaningful and purposeful lives throughout their years,” he said, adding that the current view that seniors “impose a crippling burden on society” is a very limiting mindset that needs to change.

In order to better unleash the potential of people to contribute as they age, “it is critical that we unlock the ‘longevity dividend’, which will in turn benefit people of all ages and societies around the globe”, said Mr Heng.

He was giving the opening address at the first summit on the United States’ National Academy of Medicine’s Global Roadmap for Healthy Longevity at the National



Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat with (from left) Dr Victor Dzau, president of the United States’ National Academy of Medicine; Ms Mary Ann Tsao, chairman of Tsao Foundation; and Professor John Eu-Li Wong, senior vice-president of health innovation and translation at the National University of Singapore, at the first summit on the National Academy of Medicine’s Global Roadmap for Healthy Longevity. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HEALTH SYSTEM

University Health System Tower block in Kent Ridge.

The road map, published in June, is the result of three years’ work by an international commission of experts from multiple domains to envision a world where people live longer lives, and how they can best do so through a whole-of-society approach.

Professor John Eu-Li Wong, senior vice-president of health innovation and translation at the National University of Singapore, co-chaired the commission with Professor Linda Fried, dean of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.

The report highlights areas where actions taken could significantly improve healthy longevity, including opportunities for meaningful engagement at every stage of life, social protection, financial security, physical environment, healthcare and lifelong learning.

Mr Heng told participants at the event that while people are living longer, the retirement age has stayed about the same, and added: “It is an unfortunate reality that ageist practices and attitudes are still commonplace.”

While legislation can help, it is more important that employers recognise that offering opportuni-

ties to older workers is not charity but, rather, good practice for their companies.

“Research has found that older people in multi-generational teams tend to boost the productivity of those around them, and such mixed teams perform better than single-generation ones,” noted Mr Heng.

While mindset change is always difficult, Mr Heng said it is possible, pointing to the large number of women in the workforce today, a scenario that would have been unthinkable a generation or two ago.

“I am hopeful that in the years ahead, we will similarly be able to tap on the full potential of seniors to contribute to our communities,” he said.

According to the report, while people are living longer, they are also living more years in poor health.

Singapore has managed to make some progress on this front with healthy years going up from 66.6 years in 1990 to 73.9 years in 2019. Mr Heng said getting people to stay healthy for longer is an ongoing effort and more needs to be done to alleviate the stresses around the last years of life.

He added that health is about physical, mental and social well-being: “Our aspiration is that even seniors with physical or cognitive frailty should have the confidence to continue to go out and lead active lives.”

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Road map for healthy longevity

The world’s population is ageing. This can become either a burden that society has to bear, or a benefit to all if older people remain healthy and continue contributing to the economy and society for a longer time.

Recognising the need to promote healthy longevity, the National Academy of Medicine in the United States set up an international commission of experts to point the way forward.

They published the Global Roadmap for Healthy Longevity in June, which summarised the key considerations now that people live longer, and the steps needed to ensure longer and more meaningful lives:

1 Economic benefits generated by people living, working, volunteering and engaging longer.

2 Social infrastructure, institutions and business systems that enable safe and meaningful work and other community engagements at every stage of life.

3 Education and training opportunities that promote participation in lifelong learning and growth.

4 Social cohesion augmented by inter-generational connections and the creation of opportunities for purposeful engagement by older people at the family, community and societal levels.

5 Social protection and financial security that mitigate the effects of financial vulnerability at older ages.

6 Physical environments and infrastructure that support functioning and engagement for people at older ages.

7 Integrated public health, social service, person-centred healthcare, and long-term care systems designed to extend years of good health and support the diverse health needs of older people.

8 Quality long-term care systems to ensure people receive the care they need in the setting they desire for a life of meaning and dignity.

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