

Among the remarkable achievements of the last Century have been rapidly reducing infant mortality and accelerating increases in the span of life. These are triumphs of preventative public health, from the prenatal period and throughout life.

They have, however, also brought the challenge of demographic change. Relative to those in the later years of life, there is a reducing proportion of those in childhood, adolescence and of working age—and family size is shrinking.

These changes carry profound implications for health and aged care policies to support older citizens and their families, with increasing costs to national budgets.

Longer lives and smaller families have intergenerational impacts. Smaller family size means less scope to share the care responsibilities, within families. As for child care, there is growing dependence on provision of aged care solutions both within and beyond the family.

The provision in the 2018 Budget to extend in-home supports for older Australian is welcome and caters to the wishes of many older people to remain in the family home, for as long as possible. It is also important to address gaps in aged-care services. The measures in this Budget to fund increased mental health supports in aged-care facilities and to increase mental health research, are important steps towards addressing another growing problem, of great national concern.

Moves to increase the medical workforce in rural and regional areas similarly address an important need. Another priority, however, is to increase investment in education and training of the aged-care workforce to achieve better integration of health care and family supports, across the lifecourse.

As in every era, adaptation is also occurring. In many countries there has been an increase in older people remaining in the workforce, beyond the traditional age of retirement. And there is a growing emphasis on health promotion efforts to achieve healthy ageing, physical fitness and wellbeing. Budget provisions to enable re-skilling of older Australians and to promote their health and wellbeing address important needs, provided that they can be sustained. As in many areas of health and social services, short-term interventions are likely to be of limited assistance.

[349 words]

Alan Hayes AM

Distinguished Professor of Family Studies and Director of the Family Action Centre

The University of Newcastle