

## **NARI's Ambassadors new book**

### **Review by Associate Professor Briony Dow**

One in four Australians are aged between 50 and 75 years of age, yet this large and thriving group of young old is barely recognised in social policy in Australia. Drs Patricia and Don Edgar's latest book, *Peak: Reinventing Middle Age* documents the changing face of middle age in Australia and calls for fundamental changes in social policy.

Taking different aspects of social policy in turn in the first six chapters, they show how the landscape has changed, how increased longevity, changing family relationships, longer workforce participation, lifelong education, and increased diversity in intimate relationships in older age, mean that people in middle age should not be written off as "old" with the connotations of frailty or decline that descriptor may bring.

Instead, the Edgars argue that people in this age group should be recognised for the huge contribution they make as workers, volunteers, grandparents, carers for older relatives and opinion leaders. They note that media and the arts are leading the way in recognising the value of this age group, with various films and television series focusing on diversity in middle age, while governments focus solely on health and aged care and the "burden" of an ageing population.

They describe the middle aged workforce as "a huge talent pool of great depth", who they note are better educated than previous generations, not resistant to change, more emotionally intelligent, with greater acquired knowledge and experience than younger people. They argue that employers need to be creative in finding ways to make the most of this cohort, recognising they may not wish to work full-time, they have other responsibilities and interests but that the workplace can both benefit from and

contribute to greater participation from middle-aged workers.

The final 10 chapters of Peak tell the stories of 12 inspirational Australians, aged between 58 and 82, aptly named “the reinventors”. Each of these protagonists have overcome obstacles in their lives and found ways to continually re-invent themselves including into older age. For example, Rosemary Robertson survived a physically abusive father, a difficult marriage and loss of a grandchild but with a mixture of hard work, resilience and commitment to helping others she courageously sought adventure throughout life, by no means stopping when she reached middle age. She started her first academic qualification aged in her late sixties, experimented with on-line dating and joined a group called Rolling Solo, a group of middle aged women who travel Australia on their own but supporting each other through social media. Her story shows how happiness can be found in mid-life, with rewarding work, friends and family and a sense of confidence and self-knowledge that only comes with age and overcoming adversity.

The individuals have in common, not only the capacity for reinvention, but a broad range of interests. Many of them are engaged in the arts, music, sporting and community building activities as well as their main work or family occupations and these stand them in good stead in their middle years, often leading to alternative income generating activities and/or avenues for continued contribution to the broader community. Many become seniorpreneurs.

They remind me of the Edgars themselves, who know each of the protagonists personally and who actively surround themselves with interesting people, sharing the generous hospitality of their Fitzroy home. They also contribute to a range of activities, mentoring younger artists, business and not for profit leaders, including

supporting the work of the National Ageing Research Institute as Ambassadors for an alternative narrative on ageing. They and the people whose stories they tell show that chronological age is not a good marker of vitality, engagement and ability to contribute, not only to age 75 but into older years as well.

There are many examples on Facebook, Youtube and other media outlets of older people doing extraordinary things, the 100 year old Vogue model, the 100 year old athlete or PhD graduate, Bette Midler looking 40 at age 70 and so on. But in *Peak*, the stories are of everyday role models. They are of course extraordinary in their own ways, but they are generally middle class, middle aged people from a range of family and cultural backgrounds, who represent a middle aged life that many of us can aspire to.

The Edgars argue that a life course approach to social policy is needed to maximise the opportunities that a healthy middle age brings. Governments need to prepare for greater longevity, develop policies that encourage lifelong learning, longer workforce participation or alternative mentoring opportunities, consider alternative housing options that reduce the tension between the generation portrayed in this book and the younger generation who are being locked out of the housing ownership market and recognise the contributions to family and community life that middle aged and older people are already making.

Although there have been previous theoretical works that identify and celebrate the unique characteristics of this life phase, such as Gilleard and Higgs' 'third age' (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000), the Edgars' book should appeal to a broader audience. The book is easy to read and the illustrative stories bring to life the policy arguments made at the start of the book.

GILLEARD, C.J. and HIGGS, P. (2000) *Cultures of Ageing: Self, Citizen and the Body*. Harlow: Prentice Hall