

It's not easy being a golden oldie



To encourage ageing at home, there must be a supportive and conducive home environment. What are the provisions put in place to meet the needs of the elderly?

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THE most number of accidents among the elderly occurred in the toilet, followed by the bathroom and the kitchen.

According to a Universiti Putra Malaysia survey, the other three accident-prone areas were the stairs, living room and bedroom.

This was the findings of a survey entitled "An Elderly Friendly Housing Environment for Older Malaysians" headed by Dr Sharifah Norazizan Syed Abd Rashid of UPM's Institute of Gerontology.

For toilets, the major problems were found to be squat toilets, slippery floors and the absence of grab bars. Problems with clearance

and reach were also related to toilets and bathrooms.

The objective of the survey was to help design a suitable home environment for the elderly based on the data collected as well as to explore the applications of gerontechnology in the home environment for independent living.

The survey polled 386 Malaysians aged 60 years and over in randomly selected urban areas. Those polled were generally in good health with no obvious disability.

To encourage ageing at home, there needs to be a supportive and conducive home environment, said Sharifah.

"This calls for better planned infrastructure, amenities and services. Most



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head of UPM's Institute of Gerontology

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Traditionally, said Sharifah, the trend of the elderly residing with their adult children is a norm and the practice is pervasive among Malaysian families.

However, she said, extended family households are expected to be on the decline in light of modern urban housing designs as well as the advent of nuclear households.

Today, low- and medium-cost houses are small, making them unsuitable for extended families.

In view of the changing trends in lifestyles, needs and demands, Sharifah said there was expected to be an increase in the number of senior citizens who might have to consider alternative

forms of living arrangement.

She said a review of the policies of the Housing and Local Government Ministry reveals that there are no specific provisions to meet the needs of the elderly.

For town planning, there is also no specific provision for the development of facilities for the elderly.

Local authorities, said Sharifah, looked upon the setting up of homes for the elderly as the setting up of businesses.

Therefore, she said, these are carried out in designated commercial properties.

However, there was a relaxation of the rule allowing residential property for the use of caring for the elderly, but the validity of the licensing is on a year-to-year basis with the condition being there are no complaints from the neighbours.

“A purpose-built nursing home would be classified as ‘institutional’.

“However, development land designated for ‘institutional use’ have been refused by agencies dealing with land matters for the approval of nursing homes.”

This was one of the problems that needed to be looked into, said Sharifah.

In addition to the types of homes, the elderly also find it difficult to move about in Malaysia.

They (the senior citizens) said the cities were no-go areas due to the problems of signage, lack of street furniture and lack of public toilets.

In another UPM survey in 2005 headed by Sharifah entitled "Activities, Access and Ageing", it was found that more than 40 per cent of the elderly were home bound.

The survey, done around Kajang, showed there was a need to look seriously into access and mobility of the elderly in Malaysia.

"They said the cities were no-go areas for them due to the problems of signage, lack of street furniture and lack of public toilets," said Sharifah.

"Other reasons included public transport, as well as lack of respect by society towards them.

"The finding shows that the elderly in Malaysia are not as mobile as those in other countries, like Japan."

Sharifah said a cultural issue that had to be addressed was the respect shown towards the elderly.

For example, she said, the Japanese respect their senior citizens and give them privileges like reserved seats in public transport and parking spaces in shopping malls.

"But in Malaysia, such privileges for the elderly are usurped by others."