

Getting involved in the country: productive ageing in different types of rural communities

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Dr Sam Davis is a social gerontologist and experienced researcher. In the UK she held fellowships at the University of Aberdeen and Sussex University (working with Richard Wilkinson at the Trafford Centre for Graduate Medical Education and Research on the social determinants of health) and was a member of the Centre for Gerontology, Keele University until 1997. She was on the board of the West Midlands Institute of Ageing and Health from 1995 to 1997.

In Australia, Dr Davis has developed major research projects in housing, ageing and health, dementia friendly environments and palliative care for people with dementia. She was projects coordinator for the Centre for Ageing Studies for Wave 6 of the Australian Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ALSA). Following six years as Deputy Director of the Centre for Applied Gerontology, Melbourne, from 2007 to 2010, Dr Davis held a research position with the School of Rural Health, Monash University based in Bendigo, Victoria.

Dr Davis is now a Senior Lecturer with Palliative and Supportive Services and Course Coordinator for Applied Gerontology postgraduate program at the School of Medicine, Flinders University. Her current major research projects include addressing behaviours of concern in rural residential aged care, palliative care for people with dementia and implementing dementia friendly environments in rural aged care settings.

Productive ageing recognises the contribution of older people to economic, social and cultural growth and helps build a sustainable community. Being involved in community life is good for individuals and good for society. However, we know very little about the participation and contribution of people aged 50 and over to rural communities.

National Seniors has recently funded research aimed to develop a better understanding of productive ageing in three different types of communities in rural Victoria. It looked at social and civic engagement, familiarity with community, the value placed on social relations by people aged 50 years and over, and how community involvement was linked to community sustainability. In particular, it attempts to address the question 'Does social and civic engagement differ across declining, stable and growing rural communities?'

The recently released report showed that, despite differences among rural communities, older people develop and maintain strong community connections and well-functioning social capital and that participation in social activities was connected with feelings of being connected with community. It also identified health issues and lack of options as the main constraints on participation.

A key message for policy makers is that older people play an important role in the sustainability of rural communities. There is much to be gained from actively supporting their participation in activities that are connected to ageing well.