A super-aged Singapore society can be a vibrant and thriving one

A cause for celebration where it reflects longer life expectancy, Singapore must continue to evolve to be accommodative of seniors.

Abhijit Visaria and Rahul Malhotra

We often use the word “super” to denote something excellent or the best of its kind.

Over the course of 2023, and most recently in the Prime Minister’s National Day Rally speech, we have heard it used in the context of the ageing of our population: that Singapore will be a “super-aged” nation in 2030.

A country is commonly considered super-aged when the proportion of individuals aged 65 and older in its population reaches about 21 per cent.

By becoming super-aged, Singapore will join a select league of nations, including Japan, Germany and Italy. By 2030, several other countries, including South Korea and the United States, will also become super-aged.

RAISED LIFE EXPECTANCY

This upcoming milestone of becoming a super-aged nation is in many ways a cause for celebration. It reflects Singapore’s continued success in reducing mortality, with consequent increases in life expectancy, through public health and healthcare system interventions.

Except for 2020 to 2022, which saw additional deaths owing to COVID-19, life expectancy at birth in Singapore has risen every year since 1965. It was 65.3 years in 1965 and had risen to 78 at the turn of the century in 2000. At 83 years in 2022, it is among the highest in the world.

Life expectancy at the age of 65 also increased over this period, doubling from 8.3 years in 1965 to 17 years in 2000, and increasing to 20.7 years in 2022.

The Deep Tunnel Sewage System that completed a milestone construction milestone this week stands out as among the type of investments to improve sanitation and hygiene in Singapore that we have taken for granted and which have contributed significantly to enhancing population health and longevity.

Over the years, the expansion and advancement of Singapore’s healthcare system and access to improved living conditions, including housing and nutrition, have enabled Singaporeans to live longer.

Still, being a super-aged nation comes with significant demographic, health, social and economic implications that Singapore must confront.

NARROWING THE POOR-HEALTH GAP

Despite longer living, Singaporeans are also spending more years in poor health. To narrow the gap between life expectancy (years lived) and healthy life expectancy (years lived in good health), the Government has embarked on strengthening primary healthcare and rejuvenating the emphasis on preventive behaviours and chronic disease management through Healthier SG. There is recognition that longevity will remain a bonus only if individuals take charge of their health.

Here, there is good news. The population of seniors is expected to continue growing as the proportion of those aged 65 and older in the population grows. This means that the number of seniors will increase, which will provide opportunities for the elderly to engage more in productive activities and contribute to society.

FIGHTING AGEISM, FINDING CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

At the heart of managing the transition to a super-aged society are mindsets require we deconstruct the use of ageist phrases and metaphors.

A stereotype to describe the rapid population ageing that is happening in Singapore is the “silver tsunami”. This term can be used by policymakers to refer to a negative stereotype of an ageing population, which may be a negative representation of older people and their contributions to society.

People know they are likely to live longer and better if they keep active, eat well and avoid smoking. But goal-setting along with reminders and follow-ups can help keep plans on track.

People who are likely to live longer and better if they keep active, eat well and avoid smoking. But goal-setting along with reminders and follow-ups can help keep plans on track.

The research shows that Singaporeans reaching the age of 60 who can check these boxes spend a greater deal of their remaining years in good health compared with those who have difficulties in these physical functions by that age.

The Age Well SG initiative announced at the National Day Rally, a comprehensive nationwide transformation across housing, transport, active ageing and care services, may also go some way towards encouraging seniors to be more active. It will be important for Age Well SG to focus on tomorrow’s seniors too, considering that health and aging should be addressed from a life-course perspective.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY BONDS

As life expectancy continues to rise, the relationships between seniors and their children, siblings, and friends will become more important. The emphasis on the role of the family in socializing and providing emotional support for seniors cannot be overstated.

Lonely seniors have shorter lives and fewer years of life in good health than their peers who are not lonely. Research at Care shoes. Seniors with diverse social networks – ties with household members and others outside the household and in the larger community – also have lower risk of mortality than seniors with a more limited social network made up primarily of their own household members.

The expansion of avenues where seniors can engage with peers and younger individuals within and outside the family could help a super-aged Singapore. These could include shared-interest activities, irrespective of age, at the new activity centres or other venues in the community; the co-location and integration of socio-recreational spaces such as playgrounds for children and exercise stations for seniors; and moves to enable seniors to safely and comfortably use digital tools for social engagement, thereby allowing virtual connections, even for those with restricted mobility.

Seniors are integral to society. Our research finds that seniors are motivated to nurture younger people. They are driven by their concern for young people, including the desire to locate good values, pass down traditions, their perceived intrinsic role of being elders in the family and society, and their belief in the potential of younger people. However, not all seniors have the confidence or opportunity to act on their motivations, often because of perceptions that their knowledge and skills are outdated and that they lack time and energy to interact with youth, especially outside their families.