Research News
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Making communities more age-friendly

Centre on Aging involved in national and international projects

BY FRANK NOLAN
Research Promotion

As our population ages, cities around the world are working to develop new programs and services to deal with their growing numbers of senior citizens. At the University of Manitoba, researchers from the Centre on Aging are involved in national and international projects designed to pin down exactly what makes a community age-friendly.

"This is a huge issue, particularly in developing countries," said Verena Menec, director of the Centre on Aging, and Canada Research Chair in healthy aging. "In North America, we're already old, and we're getting older. Now, for the first time ever, developing countries are also getting old, and they simply don't have the systems in place to deal with it."

The Centre on Aging is part of a World Health Organization (WHO) study looking at the experiences of people aged 60 and over in cities around the world. The Global Age-Friendly Cities Project involves more than 30 cities, including three in Canada. One of those cities is Portage la Prairie, Manitoba.

"The idea is to look at the similarities and differences in the experiences of seniors in as wide a range of cities as possible," Menec said. "There is a lot of similarity in the things that seniors are concerned about around the world, but of course there are some fundamental differences depending on geography. For example, seniors in Portage are concerned about icy sidewalks, which are obviously not an issue in places like Rio de Janeiro or Delhi, but those places have their own unique challenges."

Photo by Frank Nolan

Verena Menec, community health sciences, is director of the Centre on Aging and Canada Research Chair in healthy aging.

Menec's team conducted focus groups in Portage la Prairie that included seniors, care-providers, the business community and volunteer organizations. The study gathered information in eight key areas: outdoor spaces and buildings, transportation, social participation, communication and information, civic participation, and community support and health services. The focus groups were asked to relate both positive and negative experiences, and to provide suggestions about how things could be improved.

The team recently sent its final report on the project to Geneva, where all of the worldwide data will be compiled. The information will then be developed into new guidelines that could be used around the world to make cities more age-friendly. The WHO plans to launch a global age-friendly cities guide by the end of the year.

On a national level, the Public Health Agency of Canada has started a parallel project focused on smaller rural communities in Canada. The Age-Friendly Rural/Remote Communities Initiative involves 11 towns across the country, where researchers will be conducting focus groups very similar to those held as part of the global WHO project. Menec's team is leading the research in four communities: High Prairie, Alberta; Turtleford, Saskatchewan; the Township of Bonnechere in Ontario; and Gimli, Manitoba.

The goal is to have the data from the communities project compiled and ready for publication at the same time as the WHO's global age-friendly cities guide. This means that Menec and her team will be very busy for the next few months.

"We're certainly in a bit of a crunch, but it's well worth it," Menec said. "In the coming years, the worldwide impact of this demographic shift will be truly enormous, and this kind of research is an important step towards making our communities better suited to the needs of an aging population."

Betts Lecture examines sustainable energy

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On March 22, renowned American chemist Nathan Lewis will be on campus to deliver the 2007 Betts Lecture in Chemistry. Named after Robert Betts, head of the Department of Chemistry from 1966 to 1975, the Betts Lectureship was established in 1989 to bring leading chemists to the University of Manitoba to interact with university researchers and promote the field of chemistry to the campus community and the general public.

Lewis is a professor of chemistry at the California Institute of Technology, where he leads the Beckman Institute Molecular Materials Resource Centre. His research in materials chemistry includes work on light-induced electron transfer reactions, photochemistry of semiconductor/liquid interfaces, and novel uses of conducting organic polymers. He is also known around the world for his work on the "electronic nose," a tool that mimics the mammalian nose by using polymer sensor arrays that can identify different odours.

"Nathan Lewis has been on our list for a while, and we're very excited to be able to bring him to the University of Manitoba this year," said Scott Kroeker, chemistry, chair of the Betts Lectureship selection committee. "Not only is he a very accomplished researcher, he is also very active on the policy side of things, and is a sought-after consultant for governments. He was a participant in the World Economic Forum for several years, and he has served on several study panels on sustainable energy for the National Academy of Sciences."

Much of Lewis' current work is aimed at addressing the scientific challenges associated with sustainable energy technology. His public lecture at the University of Manitoba will include a survey of the potential approaches being considered to reduce worldwide dependence on fossil fuels.

"His presentation will certainly be informative, but it's also likely to be quite provocative," Kroeker said. "He will be discussing some of the current energy alternatives that we're all very familiar with. Many of these things look great on paper, but when you take a realistic look at the costs involved, some of them have serious practical limitations. Nathan Lewis has strong opinions on these things, and he has the knowledge and credibility to back them up."

Lewis is also very active in science education, from high school and university levels, to his work with governments. He dedicates much of his time to improving the perception and understanding of science among the general public.

"We try to choose people who are not only renowned for their own research accomplishments, but who are also able to connect to the public, and Nathan certainly fits the bill," Kroeker said. "We are trying to use the Betts Lectureship to show the broader university community and the general public what's going on in the world of chemistry, why it's worth following, and how modern chemistry research directly impacts our everyday lives."

Submitted photo

Nathan Lewis, professor of chemistry at the California Institute of Technology, will deliver the 2007 Betts Lecture on March 22.

Nathan Lewis' presentation begins at 7:30 pm on March 22 in room 343 of the Drake Centre. Admission in free, and everyone is invited to attend.

Bringing Research To Life

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