

We spoke with Professor Debora Price, to learn more about the work of the Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing (MICRA):

Equality for a new age

The ageing of populations is undoubtedly a dramatic demographic and social transformation, with enormous implications for every aspect of society, including social and political consequences, issues for communities, medical and biological issues.

Professor Debora Price, Executive Director of the Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing (MICRA), explains:

"We are witnessing the unprecedented ageing of the world. Life expectancy is increasing in almost all countries – and in some countries, very, very rapidly. But we are also seeing what we call the 'ageing of populations'. This happens when the fertility rate of the population drops; effectively people stop having as many children.

"At the same time, we are witnessing medical and social advances, like infrastructure and clean water, and people are living longer. When people live longer and have fewer children, the structure of the population changes, with more older people and fewer younger people."

One of the major challenges for the UK is how to structure the interaction between health and social care for older adults. We need to change our systems to match the current social demographic, says Debora:

"Our healthcare system was designed for a very different kind of population. Throughout the 20th century, it was very disease-specific, but a lot of those diseases have now been eradicated, or cures found. Now, older people might suffer from multiple issues, some of which

Professor
Debora Price,
MICRA



aren't treatable, and some are being redefined as social issues, particularly with the growth of dementia.

"We haven't got anywhere near thinking how we connect housing, communities, health and care – that's where there is a very important role for academics in the social sciences and humanities over the next few years, and indeed for us at MICRA."

These problems are being faced all across the world, but the major changes are yet to come for the majority of societies. In high-income countries like the UK, the population has already aged significantly, and this happened relatively steadily, and in relatively stable circumstances.

But, Debora warns: "Without any question, we are expecting almost all the ageing of populations to happen in the 21st century – what we have seen in

high-income countries has almost been a precursor to the main event. This time around, the context will be very different in many places."

In contrast, the new wave of ageing in developing countries faces unique challenges like ageing in the context of war, disasters, emergencies and poverty.

Debora asks: "How do you design infrastructure for ageing populations in countries where these infrastructures barely exist at all? One of the real challenges globally is that the focus has been on infant mortality, education and maternal health – rightly so – but there isn't really any recognition of the needs of old people."

With the creation of MICRA, The University of Manchester recognised that the ageing population was not only a key challenge nationally and globally →

for the coming century, but also that within the institution there was a great depth of research into ageing across all the Faculties that could be tapped into.

MICRA was originally a network, which was given institute status in 2010. That status demonstrated the University's commitment to prioritising outstanding ageing research, and also to promoting that research globally and nationally.

Debora says: "MICRA's remit is to support, promote and attract ageing research, and in that respect we have been very successful. We have a number

of core strengths, including a large number of projects relating to urban ageing – that's one of the things we're known for internationally."

This is especially apparent in the work MICRA has been doing with the WHO (World Health Organisation) Age Friendly Cities programme. Manchester was the first age-friendly city in the UK, and now has an ambition to be the first age-friendly region in the UK.

Another significant piece of work for MICRA is the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) – an incredibly important

statistical survey of people over 50 that has been going since 2001. After 17 years, researchers are seeing the effects of ageing on its participants, and as such, it's proving an invaluable research resource.

Being so close to this hugely important project is a real asset for anyone doing research in this area at Manchester, says Debora: "ELSA is hugely influential in the field – the findings from ELSA and its sister projects around the world underpin our knowledge and inform the direction of much of the ageing research that takes place at institutions across the world."



After a successful career as a barrister, witnessing the effects of major social changes in family life as people get older, Debora turned to research, and eventually to Manchester:

"The opportunity came up to work at what I think is the most exciting institute for ageing research in the UK. I think ageing is a key and critical issue for the coming century, and so this is the place I wanted to be.

"Manchester's a great place to do research. It's so values-driven, and that seeps through into every aspect of university life. As a result, academics here have a lot of freedom to work on things that they find interesting, and you see that in the quality of the work that's produced."

Debora's nothing but optimistic about the future of MICRA and what it can achieve as it continues to mature:

"We are going to continue to break down stereotypes, and to promote the recognition of older people as a diverse group. We are going to continue to make biological and medical advances, some of which might be of huge importance – we might even start to see ways to cure some of the great diseases of ageing, or even reverse ageing!

"You don't suddenly become old; you become old over a lifetime – and our focus is not only about what happens to older people. We need to start thinking about what is going to happen to younger people throughout their life course and how that will affect them when they get older."

"A really important focus of our work right now, and into the future, is about understanding that life is not the same for all 70 year olds or all 50 year olds. Understanding social, economic and political inequalities as people age is critical. 70 is definitely the new 50 for some, but not for others, and tackling that issue of inequality is part of the core vision of The University of Manchester and MICRA, across all its work." ●

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