

## Supporting Older People's Good Homes

*Notes for closing remarks for Good Homes, Good Lives conference on 24 April at Te Papa*



**Judith Aitken** - Chair of the Capital and Coast DHB Community and Public Health Committee address Good Homes Repairs and Maintenance Summit

This is the 29th anniversary of my father's death. He was a builder in Te Awamutu from 1936 to about 1965.

So far as we can see whenever we return, the houses he built appear to be as sturdy and safe as when he first put them in place, the solid brick and wood designs reflecting his childhood in the north of Ireland, and in Southland, where he and his mother and 11 siblings immigrated - just in time for the depression.

He knew the value of warmth in cold climates, so the houses he built were never at risk of weather-tightness failure.

Among my childhood memories are the many discussions he and my mother had about how to redraw standard State house designs that put the lavatory at the end of the hall to be seen immediately the front door was opened, and to design kitchens so that busy women, rather than Ministry of Work's engineers, could work in them.

My mother was a communist who strongly advocated communal living - not a notion that went down well with the cow cookies of post war Waikato!

For myself, in recent years of being on the Capital and Coast District Health Board, my interest in housing has had two sharp foci:

- how to reduce the incidence of child rheumatic fever and other totally avoidable diseases by insulating the houses of east Porirua and south Wellington; and
- how to plan for housing that will enable older people to remain “in place” and out of residential centres for as long as they wish.

Clearly, for both these populations, repairs and maintenance are critical issues.

Recently I stayed with a frugal, modest-living pensioner friend who is in her late 70’s.

The two-level stucco-clad house she moved into after her husband died seemed perfect: very close to a bus stop, within a walk of the shops, glimpses of the city and sea, small enough to manage, big enough for grandchildren to stay over.

No garden - which suits someone who regards the front lawn as the wild outdoors! You could describe her as relatively capital rich, clearly cash poor.

But as her pneumonia flared more often, her respiratory system became less and less healthy, and she was hospitalised on several occasions, she decided to get someone in to look at what seemed like a bit of dampness in her bedroom.

Behind the walls was a disgusting black mould. Inside the roof, stored clothing, books and papers had completely disintegrated. The interior of the roof seemed literally to be weeping.

Her small repository of savings was raided to ensure that the problems were fixed once and for all. Her anxieties returned to a more comfy level.

Two years later, leaks began to drip into her house and into the flat below hers. Her spare bed became a bit dodgy as any visitor had to be prepared for a small deluge if it rained.

She and the downstairs flat-dwellers have been trying to get quotes. The estimate was up to a terrifying \$80,000 and in any case the work can’t be done until next summer.

None of them knows any reliable builders; none of them has found it easy to find a builder to give them a quote. The whole thing has been stressful and tense.

The extent of her anxiety and sense of helplessness has been extreme. She is now preoccupied with

- How will I pay for the work that has to be done?
- If I can’t afford it, how could I sell the house?
- What are the risks and costs of some sort of borrowing arrangement to do the work but seriously reduce the value of the house?

- Some of the children tell me to do one thing, friends disagree and give me quite different advice.
- Who should I listen to?

The great thing about the tools you have been discussing is that they have been developed **with** older people, not in their absence or over their heads.

As the disability community says “**Nothing About Me Without Me**” – and you have clearly applied this maxim in finding ways to give older people more confidence in how to keep their homes safe and comfortable.

Anyone can use these tools – and they recognise that it is often the little thing that has the greatest impact.

It doesn't matter whether the older person is the owner or a tenant – the tools recognise social services, health services, and the housing and building industries all need to do better if they are to support older people live active lives and provide a simple way for them to do that.

What is so encouraging and exciting about the unique work you have been doing here today is that it is drawn so thoroughly from older people's own experiences with their homes.

It welds together technical and research-based information with the real experience of people, then gives priority to enabling and solutions.

Most of all, the tools recognise that older people are themselves the crucial players in housing because housing affects their health and wellbeing so significantly.

We are going to live longer and our dwellings need to be able to live longer too: they need to be fit for a different social purpose than housing has ever had to do in the past.

Last night I saw once again the deeply depressing housing documentary screened so provocatively by TV3 just before the elections.

It **has** been effective.

Before, but certainly since then, there has been some real progress on improving our regional housing stock.

For instance,

- Capital and Coast DHB is again increasing the money it puts into home insulation in the most needy areas;

- the Wellington Regional Council planned last year to provide up to \$2 million dollars for home insulation. In fact right now we have put well over \$6 million towards home insulation, and we know that a substantial amount of this is going to east Porirua and other suburbs where older people and children endure damp-related diseases
- most spectacularly, two weeks ago the Pacific Advisory Council told Capital and Coast's Community and Public Health committee that they had obtained funding to insulate 1000 houses where Pacific people with community cards are living.

Insulation for houses owned by the Crown is not subsidised by either the DHB or the Regional Council.

Late last year I had become so grumpy about the awful state of some Crown owned apartments in Wellington city, and the dreadful lack of effective repairs in Housing Corporation properties in East Porirua that I sought support from Sir Geoffrey Palmer. Enthusiastic and helpful as always, he actively encouraged me to pursue the idea that it should be possible to sue the Crown when it takes rents from the tenants of its own damp, ugly, concrete block houses, and then, when they become chronically ill, pays to have them treated in its own hospitals so they can go back to their unhealthy abodes.

Haven't quite got up the courage yet to start the litigation!

Congratulations to all of you for your work in ensuring that older people can live in warm, well maintained homes and thus enjoy one of our most basic human rights.

**Kia ora**