

# Worlds within worlds: the older person-service provider interface

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Every year over 700,000 older Australians receive community-based, formal support services. This research provides unique insights into the worlds of older people and their formal service providers through an innovative mixed-methods study, incorporating in-depth interviews, survey and data gathered through custom-designed *app* technology.

The everyday experiences of staff delivering community-based services to older people and their movements through time and space were captured over a two-week period in order to identify areas of met and unmet needs for older people and the challenges faced by direct-care workers who deliver services to them.

Six staff workers and 75 older clients from a single community organisation in southeast Queensland took part in this study.

## Staff perspectives

Staff perspectives were obtained through in-depth interviews, with information gathered via the SmartPhone *app* being used to direct discussion with each staff participant.

Staff participants were shown their own space/time maps that were created from the GPS tracking, as well as their own daily and overall stress scores. Discussion around the maps and stress scores, as well as their responses to open-ended questions enabled the unique experience of each participant to be captured in a comprehensive way.

The services being delivered by staff participants at the time of interviews included domestic assistance, allied health care at home, nursing care at home, personal care, social support, transport, centre-based respite and centre management. Perspectives were obtained from staff working full-time as well as from those working on a part-time basis.

Themes that emerged from the interview data include:

- The prioritisation of client safety and wellbeing
- The prioritisation of a preventive approach to maximise client physical and mental functioning
- Structural barriers to the meeting of older people's needs
- Staff satisfaction with work
- Work-related challenges
- Ways to improve service delivery to older people

## Older people's perspectives

Older people's perspectives on support services and their quality of life were obtained from their responses to questions on survey forms. More comprehensive information was gathered from in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of survey respondents.

The older people in this study were predominantly female and most were aged 80 years or over.

Around two-fifths were receiving services from a single community organisation. The remainder were recipients of community-based services from multiple organisations (up to four or more).

More than half reported that they were living in a house, just less than one third were living in a unit or flat, and the rest were living in a duplex, townhouse or some other type of dwelling.

A range of indicators devised by the World Health Organization for assessing quality of life across four life domains were used to explore quality of life outcomes for the older people in this study.

The four domains and factors investigated by this study include the following:

*Environmental* - features of an individual's immediate and surrounding environment

*Social* - support from social networks and quality of personal relationships

*Physical* - physical health and functioning

*Psychological* – self-perceived qualities, and mental and emotional wellbeing

The table below shows those areas of life where older people's quality of life were found to be high, medium or low.

Quality of life*	Environmental	Social	Physical	Psychological	
<b>High</b>	Living conditions				
	Access to health services				
	Mode of transport				
	Social care services				
			Support from family		
			Support from friends		
<b>Medium</b>	Availability of information				
		Personal relationships			
	Enough money				
	Healthy environment			Body acceptance	
	Feel safe			Enjoy life	
	Opportunities for leisure activities			Life is meaningful	
			Sleep		
			Mobility		
			Enough energy	Concentration	
			Ability to perform daily life activities	Own abilities	
	<b>Low</b>			Capacity for work	
				Reliance on medical treatment	
			Pain interfering with daily activities	Negative mood	

\* Each of the quality of life indicators used for this study are based on a score between 1 and 5 - High = 4 to 4.9; Medium = 3.0 – 3.9; Low= 2 to 2.9  
Quality of life indicators are listed in rank order of average scores from the highest (living conditions) to the lowest (negative mood)

## **What do the findings on older people's quality of life mean?**

Overall, levels of satisfaction were found to be highest for features of the home and surrounding environment. This suggests that strategies which are currently in place to enable older people to remain living within their communities as long as possible are contributing in significant ways to their quality of life.

Older people in this study also appear to be satisfied with the support they receive from support service organisations, as well as family and friends.

The findings from this study provide insight into the areas of life where quality of life is low for older people who are living in the community (capacity for work, reliance on medical treatment for daily functioning, pain interfering with an individual's capacity to do what they need to do, and frequency of negative mood – such as anxiety and depression).

It is well established that declines in health and increasing frailty that come about as consequence of ageing serve to undermine older people's mental and emotional wellbeing and their overall quality of life.

In examining the quality of life of older people across a range of areas simultaneously, this study has been able to identify areas that require considered attention when devising ways of maximising older people's quality of life as they proceed through older age.

There is room for improvement in all of the areas where quality of life was found to be either 'medium' or 'low'.

The findings from this study are relevant to various sectors including policy makers, health and allied health professionals, community organisations, and members of older people's own social networks.

## **Lessons learned from using a SmartPhone *app* for data collection purposes**

The use of *app* technology in this study provided numerous advantages over standard data collection methods:

- Multiple forms of data can be gathered via a single device.
- The date and time when information is captured is automatically recorded via the *app*.
- The *app* is able to completely eliminate or substantially reduce the need for participants to record information in written form within booklets, travel diaries or on survey forms.
- All of the data collected via the *app* can be easily uploaded in digital form for each participant direct from the SmartPhone.

Factors that need to be considered when designing custom-designed *apps* for research purposes:

- People who are unfamiliar with using SmartPhones may lack confidence in their ability to use the *app* successfully, and thus be unwilling to participate in research that uses *app* technology as a data collection tool.
- Since *app* technology has the capacity to gather many different forms of information, the number of functions included in any custom-designed *app* needs to be limited to those that are able to be comfortably and easily managed by research participants.

This project was funded through IRT Foundation's Research Grants program.

IRT Foundation directly aligns with IRT Group's mission to create age-friendly communities where older Australians can age without barriers.

We support research projects promoting a greater understanding of the ageing process and the care and wellbeing of seniors. IRT Foundation also funds community grants and educational activities.

IRT Group has committed over \$1.8 million in grants to leading Australian researchers since 2009.

By making a commitment to research, advocacy and partnering with community groups and businesses, IRT Foundation will fund programs and services to change people's perceptions of older Australians and of ageing.

Our Foundation is a key pillar of IRT's commitment to give back \$20 million in community dividends by 2020. In doing so, we will create age-friendly communities – a society for all ages.

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