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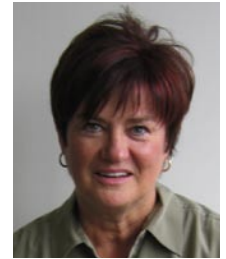
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## EDITORIAL

### The New Seniors by Jackie Flanagan



WHAT IS A "SENIOR"? THE GOVERNMENT defines "senior citizen" as anyone age 65 or over. The usual age of retirement is 65, and federal pension cheques start arriving at that time. But something strange is happening with age. Apparently, 30 is the new 20 and 60 is the new 45. Today's 30-year-olds are in the same life situation as 20-year-olds of previous generations: those in their 30s today are just finishing school, getting their first real job and tentatively considering settling down with one life-mate. In generations past, people married in their early 20s; now many wait until they are close to 40.

It's been 60 years since the end of the Second World War. The first of the baby boomer cohort is turning 60, yet many still feel and act like youthful rebels. Life expectancy is longer and the quality of health in old age is projected to be better. Even today only a small proportion of the elderly require nursing home care. Of Alberta's 3 million people, approximately 150,000, or 5 per cent, are over age 75. Fewer than 10 per cent of those are in nursing homes. Only 14,400 people live in long-term care facilities in Alberta. This means that more than 90 per cent of those older than 75 are living independently.

For those elderly who do need care, however, the situation is not good. In this issue Amy Steele gives a heart-rending account of the conditions in long-term care facilities across the province. Her story puts a human face on the cold statistics and analysis of Auditor General Fred Dunn's report to the government. In it we learn that the regulated standard of care in nursing homes is deplorably low, and even that low standard is not met. Residents receive only one bath per week. They are wheeled to the table to eat and then left to fend for themselves. If they cannot make it to the toilet under their own steam, they are left in discomfort and humiliation, sometimes for hours. Staff are so overworked they can

provide only the most minimal attention. Because those in extended care facilities represent only 0.5 per cent of the population, and perhaps can't vote, it seems the government can ignore them with impunity. It is up to the rest of us to do something about it.

Cheryl Mahaffy, in "Sandwiched Caregivers," investigates the situation of those who must care for elderly parents while still raising children. This, like conditions in nursing homes, is not a problem that can be borne only by the individuals affected and dealt with at the personal level.

Our government, however, is driven by a very different ideology—that of individual responsibility for everything. When it comes to health care concerns, our government essentially says, "It's your own fault." The emphasis is on us to live healthy, eat right and keep fit.

But what if air is polluted and water unclean? What if there are no parks in our neighbourhood and we're scared to go out for a walk at night? What if we can't succeed in school, for whatever reason, and can't get a job that pays enough to cover the rent in our expensive, affluent cities? Tammy Horne lays out the social determinants of health in "What Really Makes Us Sick." Many of the harsh conditions that contribute to poor health could be alleviated by enlightened public policy. For example, we could provide a more equitable distribution of the wealth of the province through progressive taxation. Instead we're the only jurisdiction in the country with a flat tax.

Everyone is affected by the neglect and shabby treatment of the elderly. This is a public policy issue, of concern to all collectively. Notwithstanding 60 being the new 45, even the most privileged of us will be old and vulnerable one day.

*Jackie Flanagan*