

SAGE China

Delegate Report | 2006

Liz Manley, CEO and Director of Nursing, Midland Nursing Home



STUDYING & ADVANCING GLOBAL ELDERCARE

In June, I had the pleasure and privilege of joining the inaugural SAGE aged care tour of China, the world's most populous country. SAGE, 'studying and advancing global elder care', is sponsored by Thomson Adsett Architects and the Aged Care Association Australia and in Beijing we were the guests of Tsinghua University and the Beijing Association on Ageing.

That sounds and is impressive – but to keep it all in perspective, our small group were really practical, hands-on, aged care industry people, with owner managers, CEOs, nurse managers, nurses and carers, including a RN in her 70's whose personality and experience dissolved all cultural and language barriers instantly.



Perspective is really the key word for China. Let's look at a few figures* in comparison to Australia, particularly Western Australia.

[*Warning: Chinese population figures change so rapidly that everything here is roughly true, but only for a split-second!]

- » **China is the 3rd biggest country in the world (or 4th after the USA, according to the CIA fact book, which excludes Taiwan), Australia is the 6th.**
- » **China has 1313 million people, Australia 20 million.**
- » **Perth has 1.5 million people, Beijing 15 million, Shanghai 18 million, and Chongqing 31 million (it's on the Yangtze River, I'd never heard of it either).**
- » **In 2004, the proportion of Australia's population 65 years and over was 13%, and 85 years and over was 1.5%. China has 7% of their population over 65, but that amounts to 90 million people, more than 4 times the entire population of Australia.**
- » **And this trend is accelerating. What our Chinese colleagues called the "old old" group of 80 years and over is 1% now, but will be 7% by 2020.**
- » **And now each old person is economically "supported" by 9 workers in the workforce, whereas by 2020 this ratio will drop to 2.8 workers.**
- » **As a result of China's one child policy and other cultural factors, July 2006 figures show that there are 119 boys born for every 100 girls in China. By 2020 there will be 40 million excess Chinese men looking for a wife.**
- » **Because of these trends, Chinese architects already design 4:2:1 buildings where 4 grandparents, 2 parents and the "one child" can live in the same house.**
- » **And, last but not least, the retirement age in China has been as young as 45 years old and is still much earlier than in Australia, especially for women.**

Published on
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What can we learn from China?

We were able to visit several aged care facilities in and around Beijing as well as talking to university gerontologists and to officials from local up to Central level.

What we did not see were comparable units to our own high care facility. It seems that the elderly needing high care are still mainly in the acute hospital sector, though I could not really confirm this. We certainly saw some people needing assistance with feeding and other daily tasks but most residents were relatively independent and very active.

In fact, the feeling of community and the amazing level of activity were the memorable features of all these visits. Partly because of the early retirement ages, all Chinese are governmentally encouraged to be involved participants. All the communities had educational programs. We had one emotional meeting, for example, with a group of elderly Chinese who had been learning English for 6 years so they could volunteer as guides at the 2008 Beijing Olympics – but they had never had the chance to speak English directly to foreigners like us. Having groups of Chinese seniors singing Click Go The Shears and the Chinese Peace Song reduced us all to tears – of joy, as we had to reassure our hosts.

This active lifestyle was not just evident in the senior communities and villages, with their calligraphy, music and other classes, but was there in the streets of Beijing, Xian and Shanghai. Many parks and even street verges had monkey bars and other gym equipment for adults and early in the mornings the parks were filled with groups doing Tai Chi, ballroom dancing and even line dancing! The secret is obviously to stave off the effects of ageing for as long as possible. Individually and for society as a whole, the key is to stay healthy for the maximum number of years.

As a culture, as well as a definite policy of their Government, the Chinese do practice prevention in ways we can learn from, modify and adopt, even in high care.



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China for the tourist



The statistics above tell us that China is huge. Beijing brings all that to life. We stayed on the Avenue of Everlasting Peace which runs east-west for 27 km across the centre of Beijing. There are subways to get to the other side of this street. The buildings along the street tend not to be skyscrapers, but have what the architects called big “footprints”. Imagine the Perth Concert Hall, for example, about ten times the size in every direction.

Then, down the road a few Beijing blocks or 25 minutes walk, is Tiananmen Square, the focal point for China for us. The square is huge, 880 by 500 metres – which in Perth terms would stretch from Perth train station to the Barrack St Jetty and from William Street to Barrack St. On one side of this CBD-size area is the Great Hall of the People. In the square itself, Mao’s Tomb. To the north, the Forbidden City. We stood there, surrounded by locals, tourists, touts, government agents and thousands of years of Chinese culture, right up to date.

The whole of the trip was fascinating, but would take as long to tell as to experience. So, here are just a few tips and titbits:

Do go to China if you can, but probably not for the 2008 Olympics unless they can really solve the smog problems before then.

Unless you are an experienced traveler and/or speak Mandarin, use a reputable tour company. Our tour was organized through Helen Wong’s Tours who have offices in Sydney, Beijing and elsewhere. The advantages are that language and cultural barriers are not a problem, which saves a lot of time and stress. We were in a group with a common purpose, but even individuals, couples, families would probably do better with a local organizer at this stage of China’s tourist development. And, for us, our Beijing tour guide was a tour highlight in herself – ancien’ times, very famous, very interesting and you pay attention! (She was a young university graduate, English speaking and knowledgeable, and living with her parents in a 25 sq m. apartment at the end of the Beijing subway).

Don’t expect a cheap trip. Fares and accommodation are relatively expensive and/or



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restricted in choice. Food prices are good, though who knows the fair price for scorpions, seal's ear or bullfrog? (Don't complain, I didn't mention other delicacies because this is a family magazine!) And there are still some bargains for the experienced haggler in the Silk Market – just respond with 10% of their opening price and don't go up too far.

The temples and other tourist venues are essential, as are cultural treats like the Peking Opera (and the Legend of Kung Fu, whose cast looked like the Chinese Olympic Team dressed up as monks). But just wandering the streets, using public transport and eating like the locals is equally rewarding. Beijing is a relatively safe city – and flat as a tack if you're into bicycle riding.

We also went to the ancient capital of Xian on the way back to Shanghai, Singapore and Perth. Xian is the home of the Terracotta Warriors at the tomb of the first emperor of all China, Qin Shi Huang. Absolutely unique. Don't miss it.

One final experience in Xian will stay with us. Looking down from the heights of the very American Howard Johnson Hotel at the ancient Xian City Wall, 12 metres high and 14 metres wide at the top, surrounded by a moat, surrounded by a park with hundreds of Chinese people dancing in the middle of Saturday night!

I could go on for ever, but I'd be late for Tai Chi. So, for now, ni hao and xiexie (hello and thank you – I learned two phrases in two weeks, who said Chinese was difficult?).

Liz Manley - Chief Executive Officer and Director of Nursing

