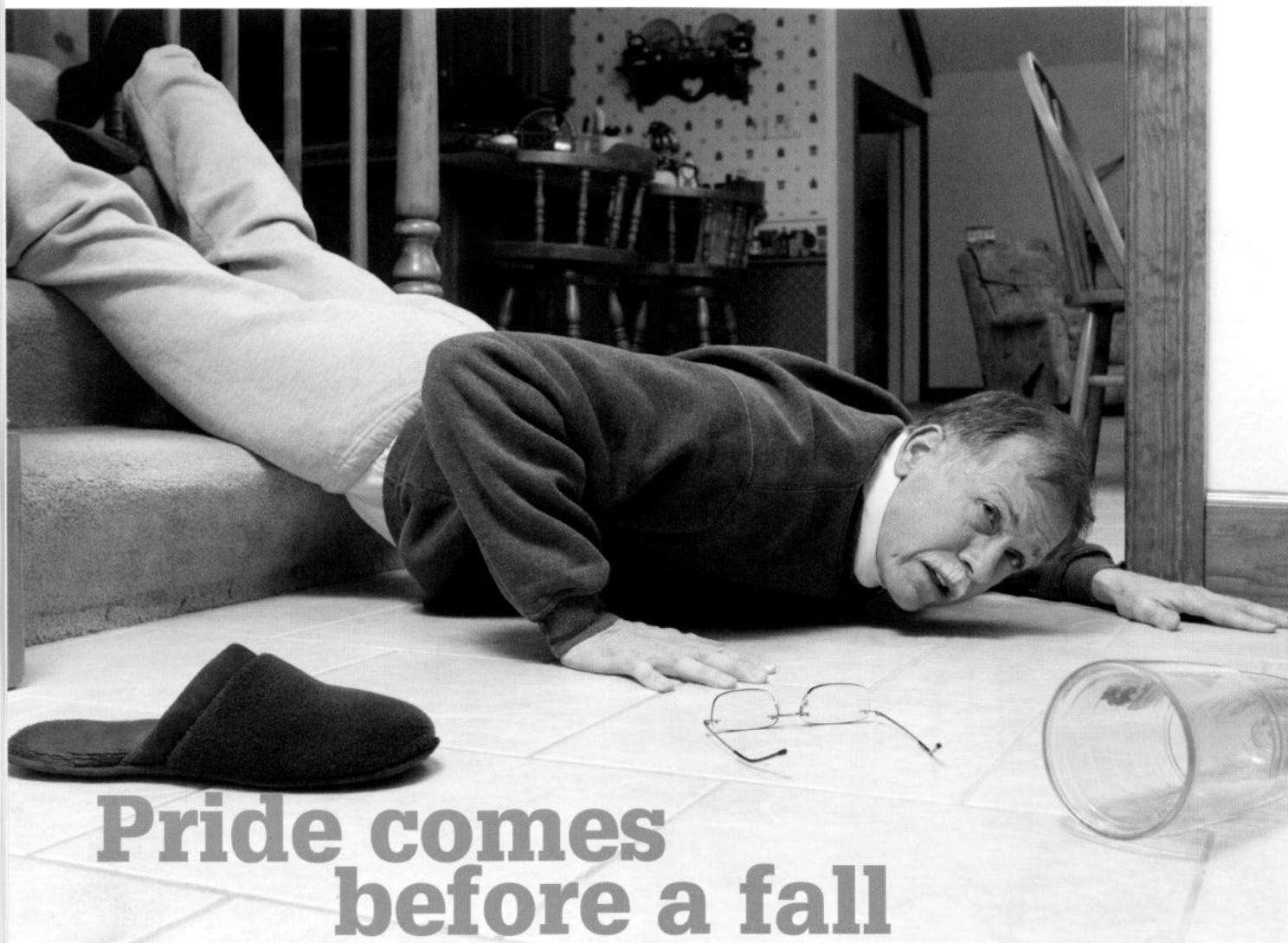


Built environment



Pride comes before a fall

Fundamentally, the popular idea of 'ageing-in-place' requires a suitable dwelling for an ageing person to live in. **Stephen Easton** finds support for raising the profile of home modifications as an alternative to moving house, and as a form of preventive care.

One of the most significant factors that impacts on quality of life for a person affected by age-related functional impairment is their physical living environment.

"It's not uncommon that people are actually prisoners in their own homes even though they have some care services coming in; sometimes the fire brigade have to remove the walls and crane them out to get them into hospital," asserts one manager of a home care and

support service, who prefers to remain anonymous. "You often go in and they've got all the curtains drawn, it's dark and it's cluttered," says another.

While living situations like these may sound like a lonely, boring and uncomfortable existence, they are still often expressly preferred to a residential aged care facility, or any other kind of supported living situation. And more people in coming generations are certain to make the same choice to stay at home, even against all the best advice. Home

modification is one of the most effective ways to facilitate them doing so, without compromising their quality of life.

"Once people are getting towards packaged care level, they're generally always going to need some home modifications, or some improvement to the safety of the environment," explains Blue Care allied health manager, Ingvar Colville, who has experience running a range of community care and support programs, including home modifications. But unfortunately, not many people even think of the idea until a fall or another domestic accident happens, and by then it may be too late.

"For people to actually plan ahead is the big thing, because it forces them into making decisions about modifications going in," Colville suggests. "People don't seem to take it on board that they are approaching an older age group; and part of that is there seems to be a lack of knowledge and understanding about

home modifications.”

Heather Catherwood, manager of Benetas@Home, agrees this is very much the case.

“People usually haven’t thought about [home modification], and their families don’t think about it either, until they’re in a situation where they’re really struggling,” she says. “Then they try and navigate the system.”

Unfortunately the stigma around ageing and age-related functional decline means that very few people plan ahead for any aged care or support they might need in future. As home modification expert Associate Professor Catherine Bridge puts it, “disability is a club to which no one wants to belong”.

MEETING HALFWAY

“Home modifications can improve quality of life and wellbeing, and we think the research evidence implies they can postpone functional decline by up to five years,” says Professor Bridge, who is director of the Home Modifications Information Clearinghouse, based at the University of New South Wales. She adds there is some evidence that by enabling more self-care, home modifications can compensate for up to half of a person’s need for formal care services.

“So that means if you’ve had a stroke for example, and you have difficulty feeding and bathing yourself, 50 per cent of that need [for formal care services] could be addressed by modifying your home, instead of the traditional solution – personal care,” Bridge explains.

So far so good. But the snag, she says, is that home modifications are far more effective in these preventive ways if put in before they are needed, and nobody wants to do that. A lot of people who need assistive technology, continence products or home modifications do not want them to be visible, so it is unrealistic to expect many to accept such an obvious sign of impairment as grab-rails in the bathroom before they are needed.

Bridge suggests meeting older people halfway by encouraging modification to universal design standards, making their home safer and paving the way for later modifications without changing its aesthetics. For new homes, universal design is now being encouraged by Livable Housing Australia, which launched in October.

There is evidence that when done well, universal design actually increases the



A/Prof Catherine Bridge

market value of a home, rather than lowering it as some owners and landlords believe. In fact, some features of livable houses, like level-entry showers, are also the current fashion in almost all new homes.

This might be nothing more than a happy coincidence as single-level bathrooms and hob-free showers also cut costs for companies building whole suburbs at a time. But Professor Bridge also sees a “paradigm shift”

underway, with a growing number of home and bathroom products designed for people with disabilities that are just as aesthetically pleasing as others. She also has a couple of theories on why there is a lack of knowledge about the benefits of home modifications.

“...the building industry itself hasn’t understood it’s something they can market, as part of normal bathroom and kitchen renovations.”

A/Prof Catherine Bridge

“At the moment, the main way people find out about home modifications is they have an accident or an injury, and in order to discharge them from hospital, home modifications will be discussed. The second reason is because the building industry itself hasn’t understood it’s something they can market, as part of normal bathroom and kitchen renovations.”

Bridge says it would support the government’s aged care reform agenda to promote the benefits of earlier home safety assessment and modification as part of planning for older age, and believes that such public awareness-raising would also strongly align with the best interests of community aged care providers.

“There is no one solution. One is to do with mainstream advertising, but I think another is point-of-sale information; when people do go to [the hardware shop], to have material that might help them make better decisions. Also, government incentives would help; some tax reduction or similar policy to drive behaviour, but in a way that is going to be ethical and sustainable.”

UNDER CONSIDERATION

Limited access to subsidised home modifications and maintenance is currently provided mainly through the Home and Community Care (HACC) program, except in Victoria and Queensland, where separate programs respectively named Archicentre and Home Assist Secure do a similar role. But eligibility requirements for HACC preclude people from accessing them before they actually have a severe to profound level of impairment.

Those on federally-funded community aged care packages are not eligible for HACC services either, and their care packages can only be used to cover the cost of very small, incremental home modifications. The Department of Veterans Affairs’ Home Front program also provides for minor home modifications, and free home safety assessments every 12 months.

The federal government has recently taken over full responsibility for HACC services delivered to people over 65, everywhere except Western Australia and Victoria. In 2015 this service will merge with three others – the National Respite for Carers, Day Therapy Centres and Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged programs – to form the Commonwealth Home Support Program.

“While there will be no substantial changes to service delivery mechanisms or eligibility in the short-term, during the development of the Commonwealth Home Support Program reviews will be conducted on services such as transport, meals on wheels, home modification and home maintenance,” says a spokesperson for the Minister for Ageing, Mark Butler.

To be run “in consultation with service providers and consumers”, these reviews aim to deliver “more consistent and equitable arrangements for older people, and enable the new program to better deliver what older people want and need”.

In regard to the idea of raising awareness of the benefits of home modifications, it seems Mr Butler is open to the idea, his office says this “will be considered both as the new Commonwealth Home Support Program is developed and potentially by the Advisory Panel on Positive Ageing”. ■