

Ageing the Finnish way

Sharing the secret of happiness

When we think of Finland, we often think of the happiest nation, as ranked seven years in a row in the United Nations Happiness Report. There are many reasons for this, but the core is trust throughout Finnish society, allowing everyone to feel safe and relaxed, reflected in wellbeing, freedom and equality.

The core of a Finn is in our 'sisu' – a combination of grit, resilience, determination and the drive to do things well. Add pristine landscapes and the ubiquitous sauna (a place of peace and relaxation), and you start to understand the Finnish mind.

While the first Finn arrived in Australia in 1770 as part of James Cook's scientific team, the first major migrant wave didn't start until the 1920s. After World War II, 22,000 Finns travelled to Australia, with close to half settling permanently. Today, when including second and third generations, an estimated 20,000 people have Finnish origin.

As with every multicultural group, there is a need to provide care services that support culturally responsive and appropriate services for older generations. In Australia, one organisation provides aged care for the Australian Finnish community: FinnCare.

Located in Thornlands, Queensland, it was established in 1975 as a 'home away from home' for older Finnish people. Today, FinnCare proudly offers a 61-bed residential home with a customised HUR FinnGym, 23 retirement villa units, and community care to over 300 clients.

Alexandra Faull, FinnCare CEO, says, "The success of FinnCare reflects the determination and 'sisu' of the residents, consumers, staff and wider Finnish community to make FinnCare the best

place to live and work, after all Finns are the happiest people in the world.

"Happiness comes from shared language, celebrating tradition and history, remaining active within the community and a sense of belonging."

In Melbourne, Hobsons Bay has been the centre for the Finns since the Finnish Hall in Altona officially opened in 1974. This heritage-listed building, located next to the council offices, is also the office for the Finnish Friendly Visiting Service (FFVS), a Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP), and the Home and Community Care (HACC) social support service which was founded in 1996 for the Finnish population.

The social service offers a weekly activity and social connection group at the hall, as well as other sites in Victoria. The service offers activities that promote positive ageing and holistic wellbeing, while alleviating feelings of loneliness and isolation. The purpose is to support independence, allowing every Finn to stay at home for as long as possible.

In 2023, Hobsons Bay became an example of Finnish innovation in the active ageing space with installations of HUR strength and balance training equipment at the Avanti Health Centre, and Lappset seniors' exercise park equipment at Donald McLean Reserve.

In April, the council celebrated 'Active Ageing the Finnish Way in Hobsons Bay', with the support of His Excellency, Ambassador of Finland, Arto Haapea. "Finland has one of the oldest and most rapidly ageing populations in Europe," he said. "As a society, we are taking action to promote and improve the functional ability of our ageing citizens so that they might continue to live independently and actively participate in their communities."



Ambassador of Finland Arto Haapea tries out Finnish HUR equipment, with Aussie Finn Dr Tuire Karaharju-Huisman and Avanti Health Centre CEO Darryl Grundy at the Avanti Health Centre, Spotswood.

"We are delighted to see that as far away as Australia, Finnish health technology such as the equipment supplied by HUR and Lappset are being deployed to support active ageing in local communities.

"Better still, we are proud to see that it is the local Finnish communities such as FinnCare and the FFVS, that have led the way in exemplifying this concept of active ageing."

Mayor of Hobsons Bay, Cr Matt Tyler, is pleased Hobsons Bay is one of the 18 locations for the seniors' exercise parks in Victoria. "The park in Spotswood is invaluable, providing a free space for older adults to exercise, with equipment that is specifically designed to improve strength and balance," said Matt. "Not only is this a place to exercise, but it is a place where people come together to socialise and improve their health in all aspects."

Despite being one of the smaller multicultural groups in Australia, it's great to see services for older people in the Finnish language, with Finnish cultural components and Finnish innovations benefiting the wider community.

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