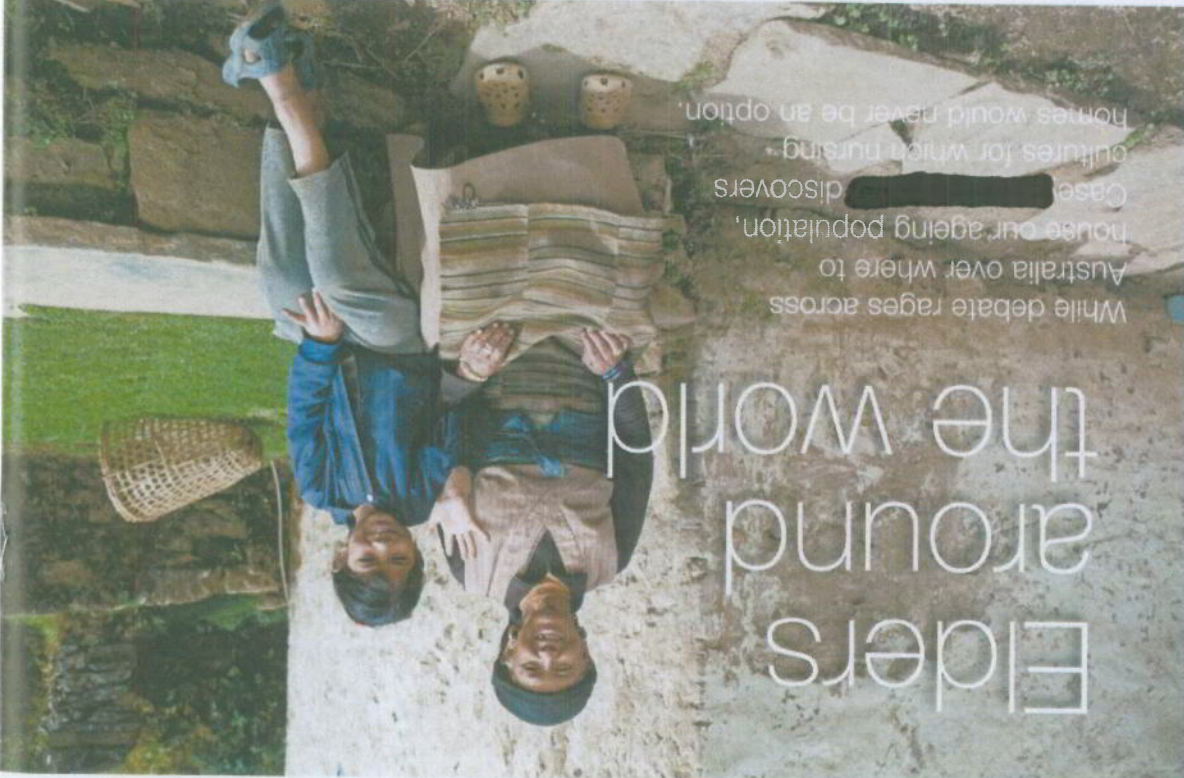


# Elders around the world

While debate rages across Australia over where to house our ageing population, Case [redacted] discovers cultures for which nursing homes would never be an option.



It is often said the test of a civilised society is the way in which it treats its most vulnerable.

In civilised Australia, the ageing of the population has been described by some as a "doomsday scenario". Questions like "What do we do with all the old people?" "Where are we going to put them all?" are being asked with such distaste. But in many countries which are traditionally considered "uncivilised", the ageing population is no such problem. What? their older population is growing like ours, another factor comes into play – culture.

In Asian cultures, the enduring Confucian ethic of filial piety means that respect for ancestors and taking care of elders is above all else. Within many parts of Asia and the Middle East, caring for their elders is seen as an honour for the son or daughter and an opportunity for great spiritual growth. It is a concept most Australians would find hard to believe and, as research shows, a large majority of older persons in developed countries want to live independently, fearing they will be considered a "burden".

## Australia has one of the highest levels of institutionalisation around the world

On the other hand, Australia has one of the highest levels of institutionalisation around the world for people over 60 years. A United Nations report titled *Living Arrangements of Older Persons Around the World* found in less developed countries around 75 per cent of people over 60 lived with children compared to only 27 per cent in developed countries. Whilst some might say that it's because poorer countries cannot afford to house their parents in nursing homes anyway, could it just be that there is more to learn about how we treat our elders? What can we learn from how other cultures treat their elders and utilise their knowledge and life experiences?



Revered Neelima with her mother at Juhu beach in Mumbai, India

### South-east Asian way of life

"In Hinduism and generally in Indian culture, not looking after parents or grandparents is on the same level as paedophilia," she said.

"If you don't take care of your parents you are judged very negatively by your neighbours, village and society. So there's a lot of social pressure."

"I feel that in Australia, people think old age is a disease. Here there is less of a space for those who are sick."

Ms Chohan has also noticed a major difference in how Australians view living with their parents.

"In Australia it's not cool to live with your parents, basically you're a loser. Even though I am an independent person, it's rejected by my peer group; they can't understand why I would live with my mum. They think I'm a very strict, traditional Indian," Ms Chohan said.

"But when I speak to my friends in India, their automatic response is that it's very beautiful. If you have someone elderly in the house, it's considered auspicious and a way of her."

"This is very gross and would be seen as very shocking in India. People in India just don't say 'Ms Chohan, a modern and successful career woman in Australia, is currently in the process of bringing her mother out to Australia to take care of her."

"But something I have noticed in Australia is that it's a youth-obsessed country. People make jokes about older people - that they wet the bed, they're slow, they fart."

"In India having grey hair is an automatic sign of respect. My older family members are treated like royalty as they are seen to have a lot more life experience," Ms Chohan said.

### In India having grey hair is an automatic sign of respect.



Ageing at Home Lequerier Fatima Haider with her parents Nazleek Higezi and Tawfik Higezi at their home in Brisbane.

### "No nursing homes"

In the Muslim world, there is no such thing as nursing homes. "The emphasis on elders as paramount and it's not just one child who takes care of the parents."

The Higezi family moved to Australia from Lebanon more than 30 years ago and has settled happily in Brisbane.

"In our family, we all take care of our parents, not just one of us, and we must obey our parents," daughter Fatima said.

"It's like that in most Muslim families and we consider it a blessing to do so."

In Islam, looking after one's parents is a duty second only to prayer.

"It's expected that people have the right to be cared for by their children," Mr Higezi said.

"In the Quran it talks about how it is shameful to be rude to older people when it's through no fault of their own that they get old and need help to do basic things."

Mr Higezi said he always left older people were treated with great respect here.

"I think there's a lot of respect toward older people in Australia."

Elders in the Murr Court

In Murr Court, indigenous elders are being used to put people's lives back on track.

The Murr Court is a Queensland Magistrates Court which deals with sentencing youth and adult indigenous offenders.

Elders play a valuable role in providing advice to the magistrate on cultural issues and speaking to defendants, giving them someone to trust so they can open up about very personal matters.

Elders are also involved with preparing cultural reports which consider aspects such as drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, home environment and family history.

But Magistrate Tina Previtera said going through the Murr Court was certainly not about taking the easy road out.

"The Murr Court is actually harder than going through other courts. You've got to open up a lot more and be prepared to go through tough programmes and counselling," Previtera said.

"I'm from the Stolen Generation and I've been able to help those in the Stolen Generation, because I understand them and they are more willing to talk to me," Aunty Teresa said.

"Sometimes people don't know who their family is. So we connect them, find their tribe or mob. They trust us because they know we're one of them," Uncle Alex said.

But Magistrate Tina Previtera said going through the Murr Court was certainly not about taking the easy road out.

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Queensland and the first opened in 2002.

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