

AGE-FRIENDLY WALKING ENVIRONMENTS

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Background: Making cities age-friendly is one of the most effective policy approaches in response to globalisation, urbanisation and the ageing population. The WHO global research project has two main objectives: for the WHO to identify concrete indicators of an age-friendly city and produce an 'Age-Friendly City Guide', and for participating cities to increase their awareness of local needs to stimulate development of more age-friendly urban settings. Guided by the Vancouver Protocol, 33 cities in 22 countries conducted the same study.

Methods: In Australia, the Age-Friendly Cities Projects was conducted late 2006 in Maribyrnong in Victoria and Melville in WA. Focus groups were held with older persons, informal caregivers and providers of services to older persons to discuss features of the built and social environments which are and are not age-friendly. All sessions were recorded and transcribed. Data were analysed and interpreted through nine topic areas identified in the protocol. Within- and between-group comparisons were undertaken in a stepwise procedure.

Results:

- In Melville, age-friendly features identified in the walking environment included public spaces such as parks, walkways, shopping centres; outdoor seating; footpath upgrade program; roundabouts that make it easier to cross roads; cycle paths for cyclists; improved accessibility to buildings; Improved public toilets; feeling safe while out and about; and adequate lighting.
- In Melville, age-friendly barriers identified in the walking environment included Insufficient walkways; poorly designed and maintained footpaths in some areas; lack of outdoor seating and shelter in some areas; poorly maintained toilets in parks; cleanliness of public spaces; poor accessibility and design of shopping precincts; heavy road traffic; streets that are not pedestrian-friendly; cyclists being careless and competing with pedestrians; increased feeling of being unsafe, including from unrestrained dogs and inadequate street lighting.
- In Melville, suggestions for improvement in the walking environment included more outdoor sheltered areas and more seating; more frequent ranger patrols to enforce collection of dog droppings; a focus for walk destinations and more walking paths; footpaths in all streets, even surfaces and cleared of debris; system of walkways to enable easy movement through areas to popular destinations; better maintenance of public areas; more assistance to cross roads such as audio or visual countdown on crossing lights and more crosswalks; divide more pathways into pedestrians' and cyclists' sides; encourage cyclists to use the road when traffic light; and provide more lighting.

Conclusions: Barriers in the walking environment impact on active ageing. Informal caregivers, and the people for whom they provide care, represent groups with additional needs.