



Diet and attitude key to longevity

The lifestyle of Okinawans holds vital clues for tackling Australia's ageing population, writes **Samantha Selinger-Morris**

Dr Craig Wilcox, a medical anthropologist and gerontologist who has been studying the long-lived residents of Okinawa in Japan since 1994, thinks he may have discovered an important secret to ageing well.

He and his twin brother, Bradley, who co-wrote *The Okinawa Diet Plan: Get Leaner, Live Longer, and Never Feel Hungry* as a result of their studies, announced their findings at the Second International Conference on Healthy Ageing and Longevity in Brisbane earlier this month.

The Okinawan centenarians are living, on average, five to six years longer than the average Westerner, largely because of their diet and attitude, Wilcox says.

The Okinawa diet is traditionally high in vegetables and fish. And while a diet high in both food types provides a certain amount of protection from illnesses, such as cardiovascular disease and cancer, it's the influence of people's attitudes that is new.

"We studied the behavioural tendencies of these centenarians when they were in the prime of their life [their 40s], and they have what's called the 'taygay' personality in Okinawa. It can be translated as

'easygoing' or 'laid back'." And we would be well advised, he says, to mirror their approach to life.

The fact that much of the Okinawa diet is specific to Asia – sea vegetables such as nori, kombu and wakame, and goya (bitter melon) – should be no obstacle for Australians, either.

"You may not have access to these particular herbs or green leafy vegetables, but you can eat in a very similar way," he says. As an example, Wilcox once studied a "very healthy" Okinawa-born centenarian who had migrated to Canada and substituted zucchini for goya, because he couldn't source goya.

Wilcox's advice could not come at a more vital point for Australia's medical health, as the country is grappling with an ageing population who want to live longer and well.

Professor Michael Kidd, president of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, says while fewer than 4 per cent of Australians were aged over 65 in 1901, they were 12 per cent in 2001, and are predicted to reach 25 per cent in 2051.

One consequence, he says, is that Australian GPs will need to address various ways to help the growing numbers of aged Australians to live healthier, more active lives.

Intervention for aged people – such as providing regular influenza shots and pneumococcal vaccines – will become more important, as will increasing the number of doctors "which is really lagging behind the community's needs", Kidd says.

GPs will also need to give more attention to the detection of mental illness. "There's a significant burden of undiagnosed mental health problems among aged Australians," he says. "Sometimes symptoms can be subtle and sometimes people don't present with these sorts of symptoms; this is particularly common among older men."

An additional challenge, he says, will be the need to handle an increasing number of patients who suffer multiple life-threatening diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

The Federal Government is trialling a project, Healthconnect, to address this need.

It is looking into the use of centralised electronic health records that can be accessed (with the patient's consent) by multiple health-care providers treating the same patient.



Ageing challenge: Professor Michael Kidd says GPs will face rising numbers of elderly patients.