

Your health can determine your housing needs

by Clay Tippett – January 30, 2019

Research for this article, along the one in the December Buzz, began with a brainstorming session with three Wasa area folks well experienced in health care: Gail Lamb, Val Dymitriw and Sharon Prince and was augmented with traditional research. They itemized the most common types of diseases and medical conditions that in their experience caused the greatest changes in people's lives, including the need to engage home care assistance or move into a senior's home with an appropriate level of support. I'm grateful for the sharing of their wisdom and research and their eagerness to help.

The purpose of the research is to develop a survey to determine the potential housing needs of seniors living in the Tri-Village area. The survey is being jointly sponsored by the Wasa District Lions Club and the Tri-Village Buzz. It is hoped that the results will provide a factual basis for community discussion about developing opportunities to stay in our local area as we age.

Sudden health events

Other than the newly normal aches and stiffness, life in the grey lane can generally flow quite pleasantly, until abruptly it doesn't.

- A stroke that occurs when others are around to react, and paramedics arrive quickly, can result in few or no negative consequences. Sadly, sometimes fortuitous things don't happen and a person is left with a body that doesn't work properly; nothing is ever the same again. The chronic version of strokes known as TIAs or mini-strokes can be just as debilitating over time.
- Heart attacks sometimes start with commonly recognized symptoms and the medical response can be timely and successful. Other times symptoms can be subtle, are misinterpreted or ignored, and significant damage results.
- Many of us are sure we are just as agile and strong as when we were twenty and can get away taking the same physical risks we always did. Accidents and falling are for others. Until life-changing events happen to us.

When things do go wrong, casts, braces, wheelchairs, walkers and physical assistance can become a part of daily living. Regular Canadian homes are generally not built to accommodate these devices and people. We can all deal with inconvenience on a temporary basis. But if the long term prognosis is poor, one's well-planned life can be unexpectedly and permanently changed.

Chronic health conditions

- Diabetes – Many organs of the body can be negatively affected by diabetes including the eyes, heart, nerves, blood vessels and kidneys. This increased risk of damage can mean a higher chance of lessened mobility and independence.
- Eye disease – Living in the country, not being able to drive any more is a recipe for instant dependency. Losing vision even partially makes everyday tasks and hobbies more difficult. Severe blindness for a previously sighted person just adds to the complex changes that come with ageing.
- COPD or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is chronic inflammatory lung disease causing reduced airflow to the lungs. The most direct result is loss of ability to do normal activities from lack of breath. Additionally, it can lead directly to problems with your heart, and add to the risk of diabetes and osteoporosis.
- Chronic kidney disease, once it progresses, can require dialysis to survive. Living close enough to health care facilities to receive the regular three times weekly treatment is mandated.
- Nervous system disorders: MS, Parkinson's, ALS. Each of these disorders, while having different symptoms and time lines to their eventual outcomes, generally lead to severe restriction of mobility as the disease progresses.
- Cognition disabilities: Alzheimer's/ Dementia. When we can't find our keys many of us are immediately convinced that it's the beginning of the well-known descent to loss of memory and eventual institutionalization. Happily, in many cases, folks who can't find their keys at 60 are still living independent lives in their 80s and still can't find their keys.

While not as absolute as the need for dialysis, these chronic conditions generally require regular access to health care to ensure that the negative effects are as controlled as possible. This medical system dependency is in addition to the need re-evaluating ones housing.

Social situation, economic stress and personal habits

- Poverty, poor diet, isolation, alcoholism, drug abuse and cigarette smoking, singly or in combination, can result in negative health outcomes. Long term coping with these conditions can mean that you need assistance and appropriate housing as your health deteriorates.

The survey

The seniors' survey will be distributed in early 2019 in paper form and will also be available online. More information will be in the March edition of the Buzz.