

# Seniors getting up, Stepping On

Program helps cut rate of falls amongst seniors, restoring confidence and quelling anxiety. By Dallas Bastian

**M**ore than one-third of seniors fall once or more annually, according to an epidemiological study. This means about 1 million elderly fall each year, and the number is projected to more than double by 2050.

"Falls can result in injuries, a loss of confidence and a subsequent reduction in activity levels and community participation," professor Stephen Lord, senior principal research fellow at Neuroscience Research Australia, says. "Unless fall rates can be reduced at a population level, the impact of falls will grow substantially in the near future due to the increased proportion of older people in the population."

Total annual health costs from fall-related injuries are expected to increase to \$1.4 billion if incidence rates are not reduced, rising to almost treble the current cost.

"Falls risk needs to be seen in the context of maintaining independence, and services that are enhanced to enable older people to achieve this," Lord says. "Simple interventions such as balance training exercises, home safety programs, and strategies for maximising vision can prevent falls."

The review *Interventions for preventing falls in older people living in the community*, from the Cochrane Collaboration supports the effectiveness of such a program. It established exercise regimes that target at least two of a list of areas – strength, balance, flexibility and endurance – to reduce the rate of falls and number of those falling. It also found that exercising in supervised groups and participating in individually prescribed exercise programs at home were effective.

That's where Stepping On comes in. Evidence-based falls prevention program Stepping On aims to restore mobility and confidence to ageing Australians.

The intervention plan came about after co-creator University of Sydney professor Lindy Clemson combined her research into home safety with her understanding of the value of group work.

"There's not so much intervention happening out there in the community and so it seemed like an interesting way to look at it," Clemson says.

The New South Wales Government got behind the program after it had initially been picked up by the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging and rolled out all over the US. The ministry of health has guaranteed funding until 2015.

"The fact the NSW government has put some real investment in the program has enabled different areas to include it in the repertoire of falls prevention," Clemson says. "We need a variety of things to reach people in the community and it's certainly one program that seems to work, and when it's run properly people seem to get quite a bit out of it."

"We've had people who have been too scared to go outside after a fall so it's given them the confidence and the skills back and put them back on the right track to keeping going again."

## THE SEVEN-WEEK COURSE

A manual that has also been produced demonstrates how the program can be run and has been taken up ad hoc around the world. It has now spread to Europe; there are workshops in Scotland, France and Germany.

Stepping On is tailored for elderly people who are still living in the community, but Clemson says aged-care facilities with independent living units could benefit from holding the program, too. However, Swann says it is not appropriate for anyone with memory problems. The seven-week course consists of one two-hour session a week and focuses on empowering the person and teaching them about potential hazards and solutions to daily problems.

Clemson says it goes for seven weeks because that's how long it's expected to take to change the habits and behaviours of the participants.

The course begins with a balance and strength component, in which an exercise program is taught that can be done at home.

Safety at home and getting about within the community unharmed are also key topics. This includes a focus on negotiating an environment with poorer vision, including safer ways to catch a bus or cross the road.

Experts in nutrition, physiotherapy and medications are brought in to educate participants on diets that could help reduced the chance of falling, exercises they can do at home and drugs that could potentially influence falls, respectively.

"We go through all the different falls risks and introduce ways and strategies for the person who's had the fall to incorporate those in their daily lives," Clemson says.

Megan Swann, occupational therapist and co-author of the program, says, "The reason it works is not that we just get guest speakers, it's that we have a strong conceptual background behind it. That's what makes it different."

Individuals who attend Stepping On have the opportunity to share their experiences with the group. Swann says this allows strategies to be offered to cope with issues faced in everyday situations.

Swann, who has run over 100 courses, says the group environment allows adult learning where ideas and stories can be

shared, and questions can be easily answered. "You've got to be a professional but you've also got to let the group take over and so that's the skill of the facilitator."

As Clemson says, "It's much more powerful when they talk about it than when I give them a lecture."

Reducing the chance of an injury isn't the only benefit Swann has seen. "The group work process is a lot of fun and many of these people are quite lonely because they've been falling and they can't get out, so they love it," she says. "A lot of them have formed really close friendships and still meet for lunch years later, so you're getting that out of it as well."

Swann enjoys being a facilitator: "I find it really empowering because in week one they're really scared, they've all fallen and they think they're the only ones falling and by week seven you can see the change in their face, you know they're so excited, I never tire of that."

"It does change people's lives. It's a simple program in basis but it works so well."

## AWARENESS, CONFIDENCE

After suffering a fall, Barbara Johnson decided to take part in Stepping On classes. "I needed some more security about walking around," she says. "I'd had some falls and I didn't want any more."

The health department's backing of the program was a deciding factor in her deciding to take part in Stepping On. After completing the seven weeks, Johnson says, her confidence has increased. "It has made me more aware of the hazards and the pitfalls as we get around and get older," she says.

The physical advantages, "enormous amount" of extra information and advice on useful daily strategies to improve the quality of life for elderly people are some of the aspects of the course that Johnson deems the most beneficial. She would highly recommend the course and feels less likely to have a fall provided she keeps all of the information she learned in mind.

Lord says Stepping On has indeed been shown to help reduce the rate of falls in older people. Clemson conducted a randomised trial that followed subjects for 14 months; it demonstrated that Stepping On participants experienced a reduction in falls by almost a third. Further analysis established that the initiative was particularly effective for men.

"The exercise component improves balance and strength, and the educational component is designed to empower older people so they maximise their safety with respect to fall risk in both their own homes and outdoor environments," Lord says. "By preventing falls, we can prevent fall-related consequences such as injuries (bruises, head injuries and fractures), increased risk of needing residential aged care, reduced mobility and death."

Lord says more elderly people need to participate in evidence-based fall prevention programs such as Stepping On. ■



## MEGAN SWANN'S TIPS FOR AVOIDING FALLS

- Engage in balance and strength training
- Get your eyes checked
- Wear safe, comfortable, firm, well-fit shoes with grip soles
- Review medication
- Check you are getting enough vitamin D and calcium
- Ensure there is adequate lighting around your home
- Make hallways clear of clutter
- Wipe up spills
- Have sensor lights near your bed
- Check mats are secure and don't slide
- Remove moss on pathways and fix broken pavers and steps
- Mark the leading edge of your step so it's easy to see
- Wear bright colours so you are easily seen whilst walking in the community
- Cross the road only on pedestrian crossings, with groups if possible
- Don't jaywalk