

RETIRED AND REVITALISED



Experts are searching for new ways to boost wellbeing in older age – with the help of alpacas and Adele’s nutritionist. By Jane Slade

No one wants to grow old, but by 2040, one in seven of us will be aged 75 or over. Fears of immobility and dementia loom large as we age, but the greater fear is: who will look after us when we do? How can we not just survive in old age, but thrive? Fear no more. From boffins in Newcastle to pop queen Adele’s nutritionist – along with Augustinian nuns in a purpose-built retirement village in Sussex that inspired a crime bestseller – cutting-edge research is under way.

REGENERATION GAME

Newcastle is setting itself up to be a world leader in this field by transforming the city’s General Hospital into a £500 million Campus for Ageing and Vitality by adding retirement housing, care homes and assisted-living accommodation. The ten-year project plans to attract academics, industry, public sector and local communities to help to find solutions to the complex challenges of an ageing population.

Professor David Burn, provice chancellor of Newcastle University’s faculty of medical sciences, called the new project an “unprecedented opportunity to undertake world-class research that not only benefits our local

population, but people nationally and internationally”.

The psychotherapist Michael Wilkes-Spellman, dementia and wellbeing lead at ExtraCare Charitable Trust, oversees a team of specialists at the trust’s housing developments. He and his team have been turning traditional thinking about dementia care on its head.

“Part of our role is being an interpreter,” Wilkes-Spellman says. “Learning to read people and educating those around them to suggest what might be wrong or what might be happening.” Within two years, implementing his findings halved the number of ExtraCare’s residents that were leaving to go into residential nursing care.

FINER DINING

Put away those Murray Mints. The pop star Adele’s nutritionist Aidan Goggins, author of the international bestseller *The Sirtfood Diet*, has created a programme for the residents of Auriens, a luxury retirement community in Chelsea, southwest London, working with medical experts and Olympic fitness coaches.

“Older people need to eat more – but more of the right foods – as they age,” argues Goggins, who is a pharmacist as well as a medical nutritionist. He and his team,

which includes coaches from Ben Ainslie’s America’s Cup sailing team, are devising natural ways to help older people to mitigate for loss of muscle mass, which declines at 1 per cent a year after the age of 40. His six-week programme incorporates the same techniques an Olympic athlete would follow: focusing on training, nutrition and recovery, and using a body composition analyser with infrared to aid recovery and reduce inflammation.

Goggins is providing answers for people whose bodies are suffering after years of stressful jobs, difficult personal lives and what he terms “the social jetlag of youth”, which cumulatively can lead to strokes and heart failure. “Active ageing is about rejuvenation and re-energising cells, using diet to avert chronic disease,” he says.

Auriens’s residents have consultations with Goggins, who designs bespoke nutritional programmes using a blood-profiling test.

Off the menu at Auriens is raw spinach, which is very high in acid and raises the risk of kidney stones. Spinach is better eaten heated. Raw tomatoes have no goodness, he says, but if heated and mashed-up they release lycopene, which is good for alleviating stress and

preventing prostate cancer.

LET’S TALK ABOUT SEX

According to Wilkes-Spellman, sex is an issue that comes up a lot but has never been researched in depth. “We have residents who develop intimate relationships with each other and the staff don’t always know what to do,” he says. “We have had same-sex relationships developing with people who had always identified as heterosexual. We have residents who are transitioning from male-to-female and female-to-male. And residents who have transitioned but their memories regressed and they remember their life as they were before.”

Wilkes-Spellman says residents are more open now than they were a few years ago and he thinks a greater awareness in society, along with a new-found confidence in people openly expressing “this is who I am” and “this is what I want”, has been the biggest sea change. But there are no easy answers.

HANDS-ON HEALING

St George’s Park, the retirement village in East Sussex said to have inspired Richard Osman’s bestseller *The Thursday Murder Club*, has two care homes, a village of 240 independent-living retirement apartments and permission to build 72 assisted-living apartments and a day centre. The village, which is set in 250 acres of farmland, is run by Augustinian nuns, and combines high- and low-tech methods when treating residents who have dementia.

“We have our own farm,” enthuses Denise Watkins, deputy manager of one of the care homes. “We take the residents to pet the animals. We have alpacas and sheep, a couple of donkeys, one pony, a new bull called Mike [the other one retired] and our own herd of cattle.

“We also have a local small zoo that comes and visits us. It’s so therapeutic for people to stroke them. We have guinea pigs and reptiles visit as well.”

St George’s also has a high-tech therapeutic machine called a Snoezelen, which performs multisensory shows that stimulate residents who have cognitive issues.

“It’s fantastic,” Watkins says. “It’s a tall unit with fibre-optics you spread out on the floor; a CD that plays a pattern on the ceiling; and a bubble machine. Everyone loves it.”

The care homes are divided into households, each one having a different decorative theme, such as beach or woodland with sensory elements. “It’s a lovely place where it is safe enough to walk from one area to another,” Watkins says.

Jane Slade is the founder of the retirement property and care home website retiremove.co.uk



Above and right: the pool and exercise classes at the high-end retirement community Auriens, in Chelsea, southwest London. Below: St George’s Park retirement village in East Sussex

