Health groups call on Covenant for help

Engineering expert, Dr Bradley Fain (left) from the Georgia Tech Research Institute in the US with Fergal Barry from Arthritis Australia, wears arthritis simulation gloves. He has developed online tools to assist packaging designers consider the elderly, arthritis sufferers etc.

According to the Federal Government's 2010 third intergenerational report* Australia's population is ageing. By 2050, there will be only 2.7 working age people per each Australian aged 65 years or older – compared to today's figures of 5 per aged person and 7.5 in 1970.

Health groups have called on Australia's packaging supply chain to make packaging easier to open for the disabled, elderly, sick and hospitalised.

A full session at the AIP conference was devoted to this issue. Key note speakers included managers from the Departments of Health in NSW and Victoria, an ergonomics expert from Dulux and Dr Bradley Fain head of human systems engineering at the Georgia Tech Research Institute in the US.

The presentation from the Health Departments noted that the amount of portion controlled packaged foods provided to public hospital patients had increased significantly over the past 10 years. Among the many recommendations (127 & 128) of the NSW Garling Review (2008) - which reviewed all aspects of the NSW health system - were that the food services function of hospitals be outsourced and that the health department prepare specifications for the packaging and containers used on hospital food to ensure they comply with food standards and are able to be opened by frail, aged or unwell patients.

It has been noted that this food service issue was also a potential nutrition risk for vulnerable patients, as assistance was not always available when required and sleeping patients with unopened food and drink containers were assumed to not be hungry. A St Vincent's Hospital (Melbourne) study in 2008 found that about a third of patients were malnourished or at high risk.

In Victoria, tender specifications for the provision of food services to public hospitals for the next round in 2011 appear likely to be updated to include a range of criteria relating to "ease of access" for packaged food and beverage items.

Another group with concerns over the accessibility of packaging is Arthritis Australia whose statistics show that around 4 million Australians are living with arthritis - an inflammation of the joints restricting movement. Sufferers face difficulties even opening the most basic package such as a milk bottle or a cereal packet. Arthritis Australia, Strategic Partnerships Manager, Fergal Barry, says companies who produce easy to open packages are likely to benefit in the long term.

"Designing user-friendly products and packaging is a win-win situation for all concerned, giving brands a competitive edge in a rapidly growing market while making life for millions of us far less frustrating. Arthritis Australia in collaboration with Georgia Tech Research

Institute provides design services to enable companies to meet the needs of the aging population. Arthritis Australia also provides marketers with the Ease of Use Certification program to enable consumer to recognise user friendly products and packaging."

In August 2009, the Vic, NSW and Qld Departments of Health and Arthritis Australia consulted with the Covenant Council regarding accessibility and openability of packaged products with a view to having it considered as an element of the proposed guidelines for sustainable packaging design.

Covenant CEO Ed Cordner said the approach was timely.

"The Australian Packaging Covenant is due to come in to affect from July 2010 and with a change of focus to the importance of design, the new Sustainable Packaging Guidelines includes *Design for consumer accessibility* as one of its 12 core strategies."

Leading engineering expert, Dr Bradley Fain, from the Georgia Tech Research Institute in the US has developed on-line tools to help packaging designers consider the sick and elderly, including arthritis sufferers. He agrees that with an ageing population, making improvements in packaging accessibility can only be good for business.

Dr Fain's tools can be found at http://www.gtri.gatech.edu/

*http://www.treasury.gov.au/igr/igr2010/