

Heathcare gives elderly second chance

IARA M BUA

Eustatta Ernstzen gets up every day in her large room, makes her bed, reads her morning paper, then gets dressed and goes downstairs to share her time with other residents of the old age home, Heathcare, in Heathfield.

She has a room to herself; she enjoys her independence despite being older than 80. Her son lives in America with his wife and children. Like many people, he left South Africa over the past decades in search of new opportunities. Ms Ernstzen sees him once or twice a year, if she is lucky. The rest of her family lives in Johannesburg; she keeps in touch occasionally. She refused to move to America because she wants to be left to fend for herself until the end of her days.

However, Ms Ernstzen's history is not the same as the other residents in the old age home. Many of them feel alone, abandoned by their families and isolated from society.

Researcher Monica Ferreira, president of the International Longevity Centre of South Africa at the University of Cape Town (UCT), said all the nations of the world are experiencing an aging population and this country is no exception. But South Africans are aging more rapidly than its neighbours because it's the most developed country in sub-Saharan Africa, and because its huge white population is accustomed to living in nuclear families.

However, despite the economic development there is a wide gap between rich and poor. Ms Ferreira said the problem is that the country's wealth (diamonds and minerals) "reside in the hands of a few". Previously it was the white elite and now it is the black bourgeois, she said.

Jean Gradwell, who oversees Heathcare, said that police found an elderly man dead in his home.

"When police entered, the floor was filled with white particles: they thought it was rice, but then realised that maggots were eating the decomposing corpse." Ms Gradwell said South Africa is moving "in the direction of England, where the concepts of family and care are moving towards individuals."

Some families try to care for their elderly, but the reality is that their life is changing. They are working and have no time to look after their parents. Coloured families, despite having money, cannot take care of their elders and decide to place them in private senior residences, which is not necessarily a bad thing, because here they mix with people of their own age, and feel, again, part of the community, Ms Gradwell said.

The elderly still complain that in public centres they are treated like a number instead of like a human being.

"I was in a public health residence for a while and I changed to private because they were unable to remember my name," said Louise



■ Heathcare volunteers from the Volunteer Centre.

Joyce Clarke, one of the residents at Heathcare.

Researchers feel the way forward is the NGO sector. Ms Ferreira proposes a system of communal living, where the elderly donate their pensions to residences for the benefit of all. She said society does not recognise the great work done by the elderly women from various church groups and charity organisations, which support the elderly, spending hours caring for them.

"Most South African children grew up with their grandmother while their mother worked," said

the researcher.

The Volunteer Centre in Claremont has been spending time at Heathcare, but they need more volunteers from the community who can spend quality time reading, chatting to the elderly, playing board games, giving them TLC, said Natasha Simons, a Volunteer Centre member.

Ms Gradwell said that most NGOs are focused on infants and forget to do projects with the elderly.

"The solution is not only to find space in nursing homes or store

them in empty rooms like boxes stacked in a department store, their minds have to be stimulated.

"Make them feel part of the community again, developing programmes and activities with the elderly; because all our grandparents were also young once," she said.

● Contact the Volunteer Centre on www.volcent.co.za or 021 674 5338 or 0860 826 873. The Volunteer Centre is at 124 Belvedere Road, Claremont.

● Ms Bua is a freelance Spanish journalist living in Lansdowne.