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Dr Satyavati Sirsat
Hospice for the Hopeless



The Eden Alternative



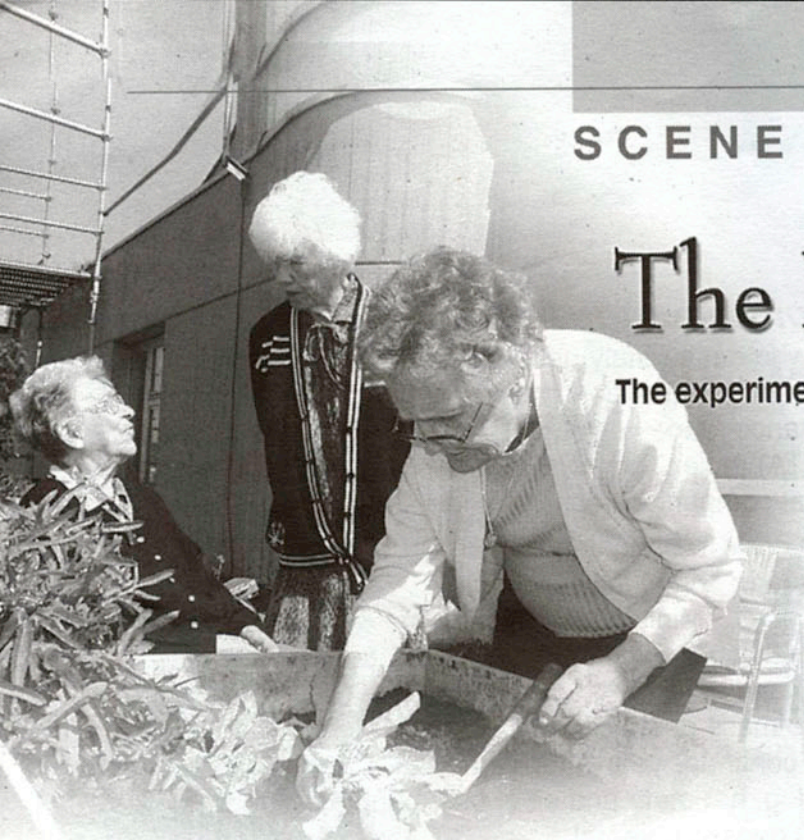
It's Never Too Late



Let Melons Ripen,
Not Your Cataract

The Eden Alternative

The experiment in integrating 'environment' with institutional care



Here is a small movement aiming to change the quality of life experienced in retirement homes around the world by emphasising the need for more rounded experience for residents. **Dr Sheilu Sreenivasan** in conversation with **Christa Monkhouse**.

*T*he Eden Alternative is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to improving the experience of ageing and disability around the world. It is an attempt to improve the quality of life of residents by facilitating them to recapture a meaningful work life. It shows how the opportunity to give meaningful care to other living things, animals and plants, and the variety and spontaneity that mark an enlivened environment can succeed where pills and therapies fail. It's better to live in a garden, according to its practitioners.

Founded in the USA in 1992 by the physician and geriatrician Dr W H Thomas, the Eden Alternative has since spread to many countries around the world: its ideas have been implemented in Australia, Canada, and Japan; there are the piloting nursing homes in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, UK and Scandinavia which adopted the Eden approach. There are roughly 2500 direct beneficiaries of this approach in Europe and about 10,000 in the rest of the world.

Places that have adopted the Eden Alternative typically are filled with plants, animals and are regularly visited by children.

Dr Sheilu Sreenivasan in conversation with Christa Monkhouse, the Eden Alternative European Coordinator and a nurse-specialist, currently a PhD candidate at the University of Surrey, UK.

How would you describe the experience of the elderly living in nursing homes and other retirement communities in the world? That is, in the institutional model that abound, what are

people experiencing?

....people often say "I would rather die than end up in a nursing home", people are afraid of being disconnected, idle, cut off from "real life", lose status, meaning, and belonging. They indeed suffer from loneliness, helplessness and boredom. I have spoken to many residents and families. Many are afraid of being a burden to their family and society, the carers.

The core idea of the Eden Alternative is to create a more personal and homely atmosphere in caring institutions, which allows the elderly people to feel more comfortable and enjoy their living. Building relationships, engaging in meaningful activities and professional care constitute a powerful antidote against loneliness, helplessness and boredom. Active interaction with peers, other adults, and children, taking care of animals and plants, and other meaningful activities are the important ways to enrich the lives of the elderly. The gain would be a happier, healthier, and longer life and decreased needs of medical intervention. The institutions benefit directly from the higher occupancy and lower medical expenses. Also, the kind and warm atmosphere in such caring institutions has positive effects on employees, as higher job-satisfaction directly impacts staff turnover. Indirectly, this approach further benefits the families of the people affected, and the wider society as a whole.

Personally what draws you to this movement?

People often ask this question thinking that I must have a big heart for older people. From my own

practice however, I realised that loneliness, helplessness and boredom are such big sources of suffering which need to be alleviated, not just for the old people now, but for me and the generations after me. And I wanted to do it professionally, like a social entrepreneur, not as a "nice to have" charity. For the past 7 years I have been working towards this goal with passion.

You are a clinical Nurse. Generally people stay in that mould and undertake routine assistance/nursing services. How did you come to embrace this philosophy?

I left my nursing mould fascinated intellectually how multifaceted quality of life is and how different professions can contribute to this exercise. And, it is also for me and my future. If we are racist, we will never belong to the race we look down on. However, if we are ageist, one day we are part of this group we looked down onto and discriminated against.

In your view what are Ageing Professionals heading? Are there any other trends emerging in Elder Care generally?

I think the culture change, from a medical or institutional model to a social support model, is the only way to go. So I don't participate in discussion where people think that care can be handed over to technology. However, technology is a good way to take over routine jobs and to enhance connectedness and communication. Anti ageing is another trend, the dream to stay young. However, we need to find meaningful roles for this extended lifespan, should anti-ageing ever be successful, which includes relationships, reciprocity and a diverse life. And the same things are proposed by the Eden Alternative, therefore it is also valid as an intergenerational model.

If you had a free hand, what would you like to do in establishing what type of elder care?

I think there is room for many models, nursing homes, assisted living, multigenerational living, self directed houses where residents "buy" or hire the help they need. But all diverse forms of ageing living can be guided by the principles of the Eden Alternative, because it makes you think not in terms of services, costs and burden to society, but in services and relationships, and this is what we need at any time in our lives.

The main achievement of June Burgess, Regional Coordinator for UK and Ireland and Christa Monkhouse is the adaptation of the Eden Concept to the environment and culture of different European countries. The experiment can be compared with Baba Amte's *Anandvan*, where focus is on integrating aspects of environment into care.

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