



Rex IN THE CITY

OLDER people have seven great fears – loneliness, isolation, poverty, age-related illness, loss of relevance, loss of independence and loss of autonomy. Bill McClurg, managing director of Omega Senior Care, a major retirement living developer, says the list is the result of extensive international research.

People entering Bill's Anzac Hwy office are greeted not by a receptionist but by a friendly airedale named Rusty.

"The dog comes to work with me every day, through retirement villages," he says.

"It makes you human. A lot of our residents might be feeling a bit stressed, a bit uptight. They turn to the dog."

Bill understands the needs, and fears, of Australia's ageing population. Do older people fear being imprisoned because of age?

"It has more to do with society expectations," Bill says.

"People don't choose this for their parents and the parents don't choose it for themselves.

"It is something that evolves. Effectively older people have got this expectation that they have got to leave the maximum inheritance for their kids.

"When I talk to the kids, I often find that when people die their kids learn more about their parents from the obituaries than they actually knew.

"Kids have got a habit of not knowing their parents very well. Parents have got a habit of not letting their kids know them well.

"You get this lack of communication that seems to result in this imprisonment of older people, getting stuck in their own home, facing what we know as the seven great fears.

"People, as they get into older age, don't particularly want to make financial decisions, particularly financial decisions that might relate to the kids' inheritance."

What about leaving the family home? "That's there. It has a lot more to do with the financial aspect than it has to do with the bricks and mortar," he says.

"It is no longer good enough to have four walls and a roof.

"They can still suffer from all these seven issues."

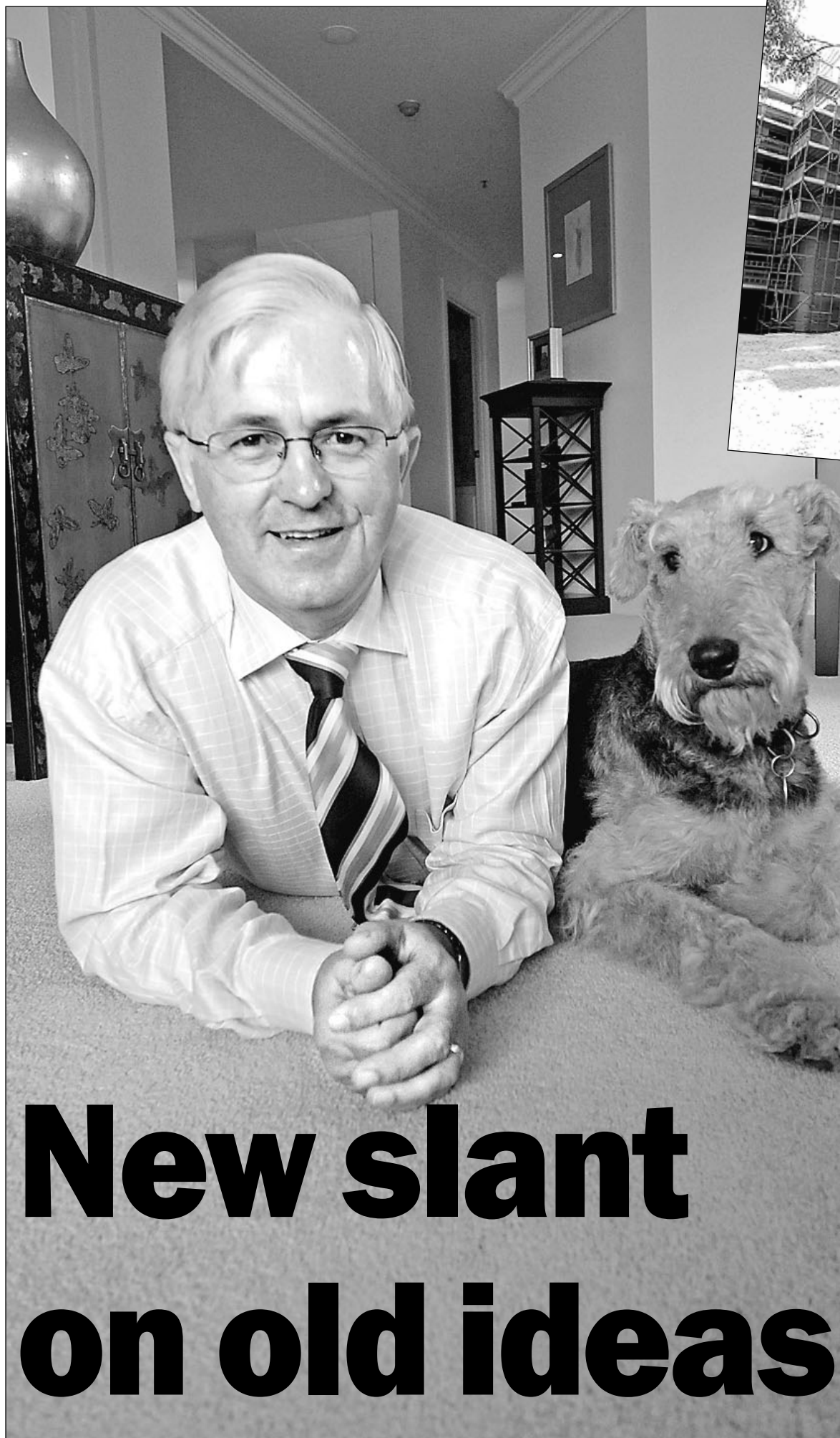
Older people are often cash poor and their home is usually more than 80 per cent of their assets.

"It's still that nest egg for the rainy day," he says. "So they don't want to spend that. They don't get into addressing their current needs, which is a lot more to do with getting into an environment instead of being lonely, where they can make new friendships."

Is moving into a smaller unit a way of removing at least some of the seven?

"Yes," Bill says. "There are people doing it earlier. That's for people who generally make that kind of decision in their mid-60s."

But he says some people don't make the decision until their mid-70s. Bill says the children of elderly people do not always understand how many friends their parents



New slant on old ideas

DOG DAYS: Bill McClurg and Rusty inside an Omega display unit.

have lost and how hard loneliness and loss of independence can be.

He tells the moving story of a client in one of the care units who kept a Rolls-Royce although he was too old to drive.

'HIS grandson came once a month to take the car out for a run and take him out in the car," Bill says. "Retaining that car somehow satisfied a manly need and a need to be in control.

"And taking that man's car away, if you put him into a traditional aged-care facility, would just take away a big chunk of real life.

"You don't really know whether it would take away his total reason for being here. Certainly it was a very important bit."

Bill says it's important not to give people what they need but what they want – which can be different things. "It's caring about people rather than necessarily caring for them." Bill says it is critical the ultimate occupants of a new living style are involved in the decision.

"Unless mum is involved, or mum and dad, if they are not involved and not driving the decision, we are not interested," he says.

Bill was born into a farming family and came to Australia in 1971 when he was 21.

He married his Irish girlfriend and they have three children.

In Ireland, Bill worked in retail, took a job at Myer in Adelaide selling hardware and air-conditioners and then moved into real

estate. He built up a successful business and moved into development before meeting his partner, John McMahon, about 1990.

Bill and John set up Omega in the early 1990s when they realised some people had left it too late to go into retirement villages.

The first major project they undertook was the development of the old Marryatville Bowling club site on Tusmore Ave, Leabrook.

"We were trying to stay away from the illness model and stay with the wellness model," Bill says.

This meant placing people in smaller accommodation while they were still fit enough to make new friends and continue an active life.

They established a setting which allowed people to function as a



ON THE MOVE: Construction of the Omega group's Anzac Hwy complex at Ashford continues.

family "sort of in the old-fashioned way. Mum cared for the kids both physically and emotionally and dad went out and fought the lions and tigers, protected them and provided the financial security for them. Not replicate the family but replicate what the family does".

Bill, who was born in Northern Ireland, says there is an old Irish belief that if someone wants to do something let them fire away.

"We try to get rid of as many of the rules and try to function as a family and try to allow you to get what you want," he says.

Is he suggesting that people in their mid-60s, not their mid-70s, should be making a decision about their old-age accommodation and their lifestyle?

"Absolutely," Bill says. While moving may not be for everyone, a lot of people don't think about "what if", and when something happens it is generally too late.

BILL says retirement is more than cutting lawns and cleaning gutters.

"The main issue is what's going on inside the head, how people feel," he says. "... if you are as lonely as hell, then depression is a big issue. Depression is the big black dog in ageing. I suspect it is in a lot of our community and doesn't get talked about."

John McMahon cuts in: "It's very much linked to that loss of relevance, too. If you have been a mover and shaker all your life and have had a high-profile position and become totally irrelevant, cutting the lawn doesn't fill the gap."

Moving accommodation for the elderly is really getting people to decide about getting among a community of like-minded people, into a community where they are going to feel secure and where they are going to make new friends.

Bill says the bricks and mortar side is only a third of what Omega does. Two-thirds is social engineering – eliminating at least some of the seven fears.

John says he would add mobility to the seven concerns of ageing.

"In Australia, we are very linked to the motor car," he says.

"People might live 200m from a shopping centre but if they have mobility problems, they might as well be 10km away."

□ joryr@adv.newsltd.com.au