

### **Living close to shopping areas may depress older Australian men**

Easy access to local shops and stores may provide relaxing retail therapy for many people but may contribute to make older Australian men depressed, according to new research funded by the Bupa Health Foundation.

The study, by researchers at the University of Western Australia (UWA) and published in the prestigious *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, shows that older people living in areas with high availability of retail outlets and services are at a greater risk of depression than the rest of the population.

Professor Osvaldo Almeida, from the WA Centre for Health and Ageing and study author said, “The availability of retail is often considered a factor that may enhance public health as it creates places for people to walk and socialise. However, our findings suggest when the density of shops increases the risk of depression in older men also increases.

“While at first glance it might seem strange that living in an area with shopping centres could negatively impact on the mental health of older men. However, these types of facilities often attract more strangers into a neighbourhood, increase traffic and may be seen as a place for young people, not a place where old men belong. The unfortunate consequence is that this may contribute to their social isolation and decreased activity, which in turn increases the risk of depression.

“It would be an irony to realise that as our neighbourhoods get busier, the more isolated and vulnerable older people may feel.”

The data from more than 5,000 older West Australian men - including depression ratings and geographic locations - were analysed for this study: *The Built Environment and Depression in Later Life: The Health in Men Study*.

“There is no doubt we need to fully understand how the ‘built environment’ can impact on the mental health of our community and particularly its older members. This is very much an issue that deserves further research,” said Professor Almeida.

“Depression is a common disabling condition suffered by older men,” said Dr Christine Bennett, Chair of the Bupa Health Foundation Steering Committee and Bupa Australia’s Chief Medical Officer.

“Although a lot of attention has been paid to social support and lifestyle, and their effects on the mental wellbeing of older men, research into the impact of the broader environment in which they live has been quite limited. This innovative study challenges us to carefully consider the potential health impacts when planning and designing the built environment in which our communities live.”