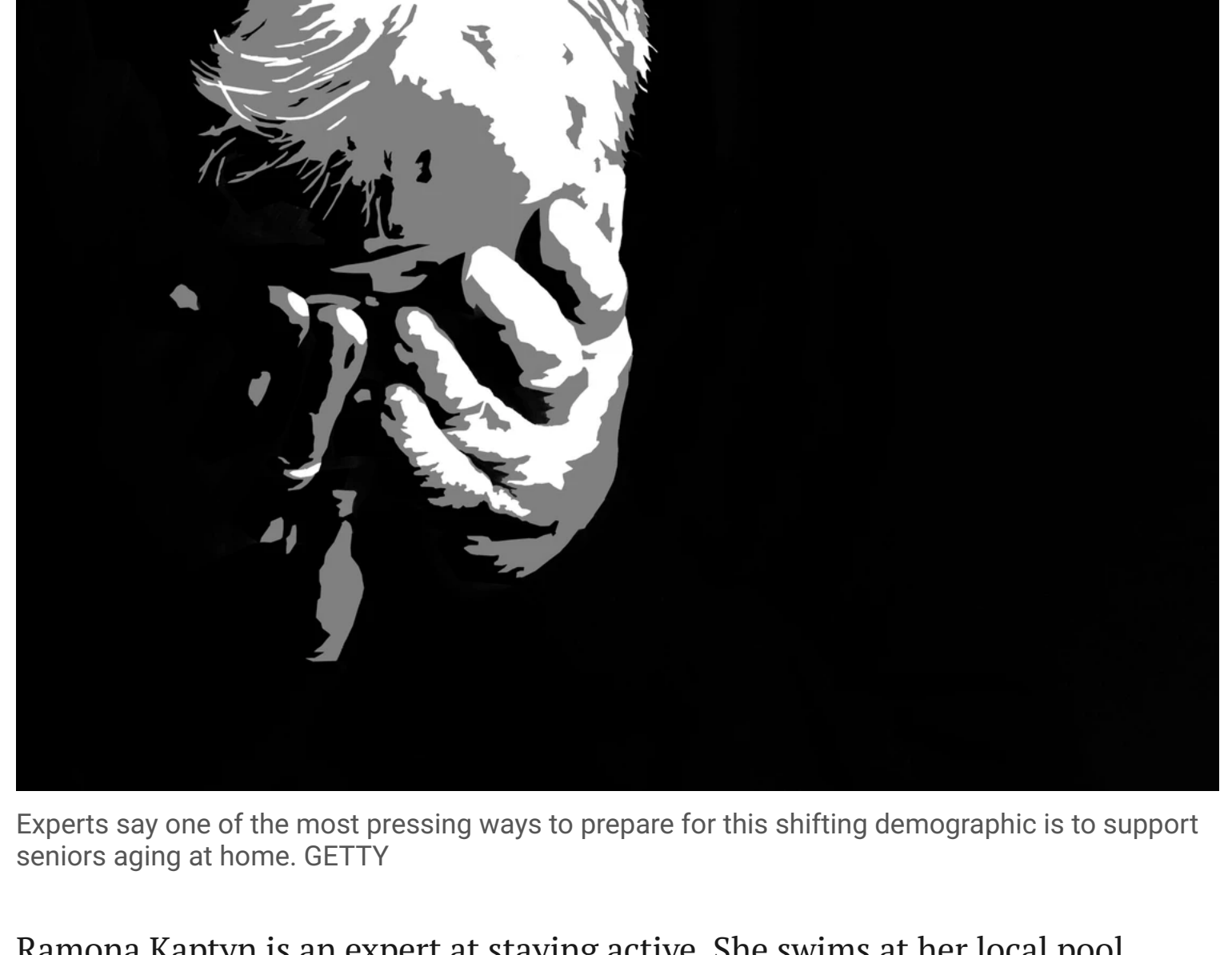


We have a ways to go in how we support aging Canadians, but for many, getting older can be a great experience

'Our spending is way out of line compared to many European and Scandinavian countries which do a much better job of supporting people staying in their own homes,' says advocate.

Vanessa Hrvatin
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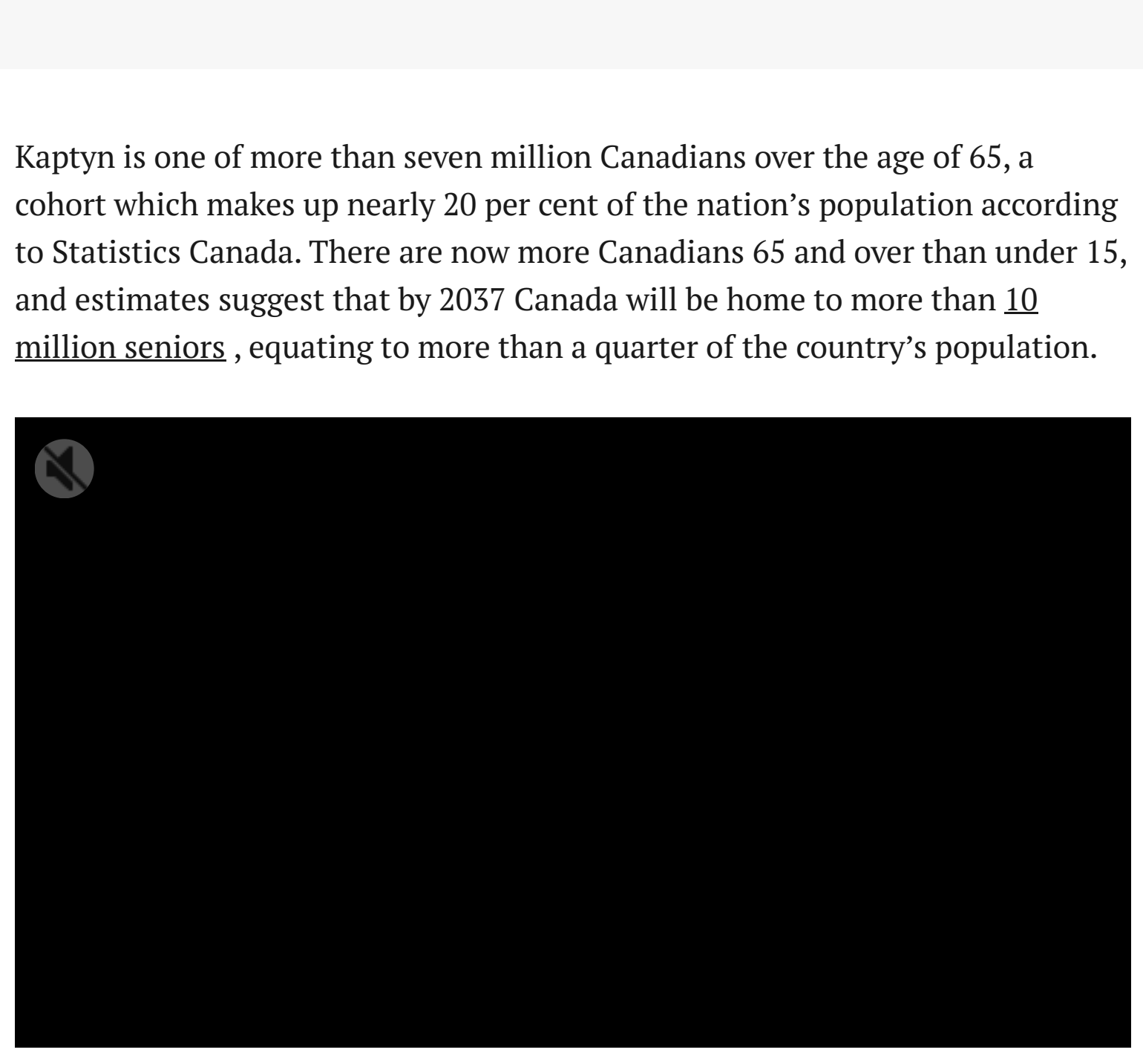


Experts say one of the most pressing ways to prepare for this shifting demographic is to support seniors aging at home. GETTY

Ramona Kaptny is an expert at staying active. She swims at her local pool, holds several volunteer positions and is running for Surrey, B.C., city council. When asked about her age, Ramona says she's "70-plus," and that aging has given her the opportunity to do many things she didn't have time for when she was younger.

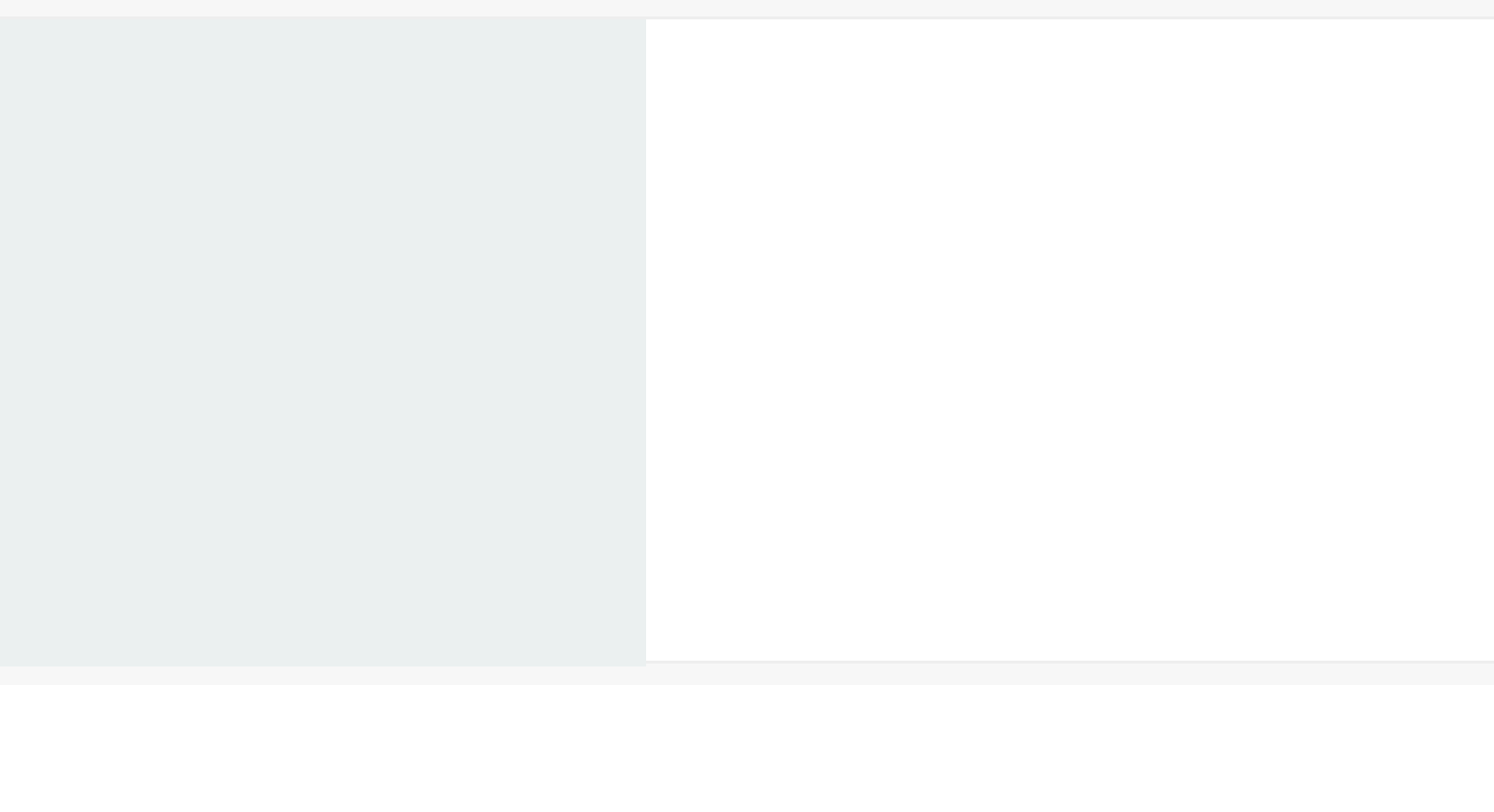
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Kaptny is one of more than seven million Canadians over the age of 65, a cohort which makes up nearly 20 per cent of the nation's population according to Statistics Canada. There are now more Canadians 65 and over than under 15, and estimates suggest that by 2037 Canada will be home to more than 10 million seniors, equating to more than a quarter of the country's population.



Experts say one of the most pressing ways to prepare for this shifting demographic is to support seniors aging at home.

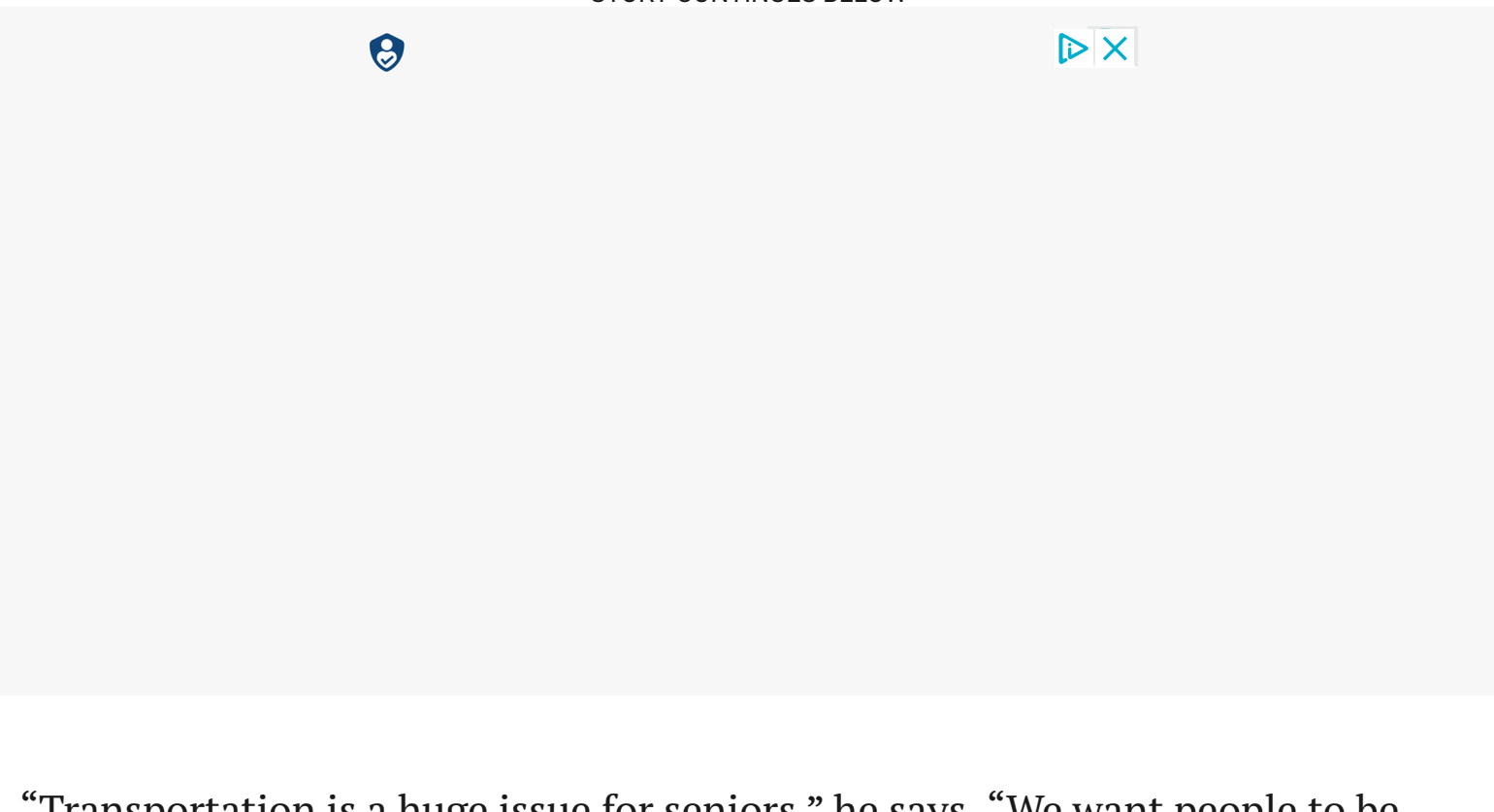
Roughly seven per cent of Canadians live in some type of assisted care facility, which means more than 90 per cent live at home. But advocates say government spending doesn't line up with these numbers — about 80 per cent of spending on eldercare goes to institutions, with only 20 per cent spent on home care. Some estimates suggest that up to 50 per cent of people living in long-term care facilities could be cared for at home if resources were allocated differently.



European countries 'do a better job' of supporting seniors

"Canada hasn't put the emphasis on organizing and funding home and community care that we should have," says Bill VanGorder, chief operating officer of the Canadian Association of Retired Persons (CARP). "Our spending is way out of line compared to many European and Scandinavian countries which do a much better job of supporting people staying in their own homes. Often, here in Canada, people end up moving out of their home because they need one small thing, maybe help with an injection twice a week — something that could have been more efficiently delivered in their own home."

Along with more home care resources, VanGorder says Canada needs to focus on making communities more senior-friendly.



"Transportation is a huge issue for seniors," he says. "We want people to be able to stay in their communities but if they can't get to their doctor or their pharmacy then we've lost them; they'll end up having to move into a facility."

Challenges like access to transportation are especially evident in rural communities. While roughly 80 per cent of seniors live in an urban setting, about a quarter of people who live in a rural setting are over the age of 65.



Ramona Kaptny shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, her age encourages her to be more active. SUPPLIED

Dr. Elizabeth Russell, director of the Trent Centre for Aging & Society in Peterborough, Ont., says that while provincial grants exist to help communities implement policies and programs to become more age-friendly, initiatives often fall on the shoulders of volunteers and tend to be unsustainable, especially in small communities. But there are creative approaches underway to making communities more senior-friendly. Trent University is in the process of developing a senior's village on campus, which will be designed so it's fully accessible for seniors and will include a long-term care facility.

"We know that having students integrated into the lives of older adults and vice versa is beneficial for both groups because there's so much learning that can be done including for the people in the middle, like faculty and staff," says Russell. "This is a major initiative and it's quite ground-breaking."

Along with housing concerns, medical care is also often top of mind as people age.

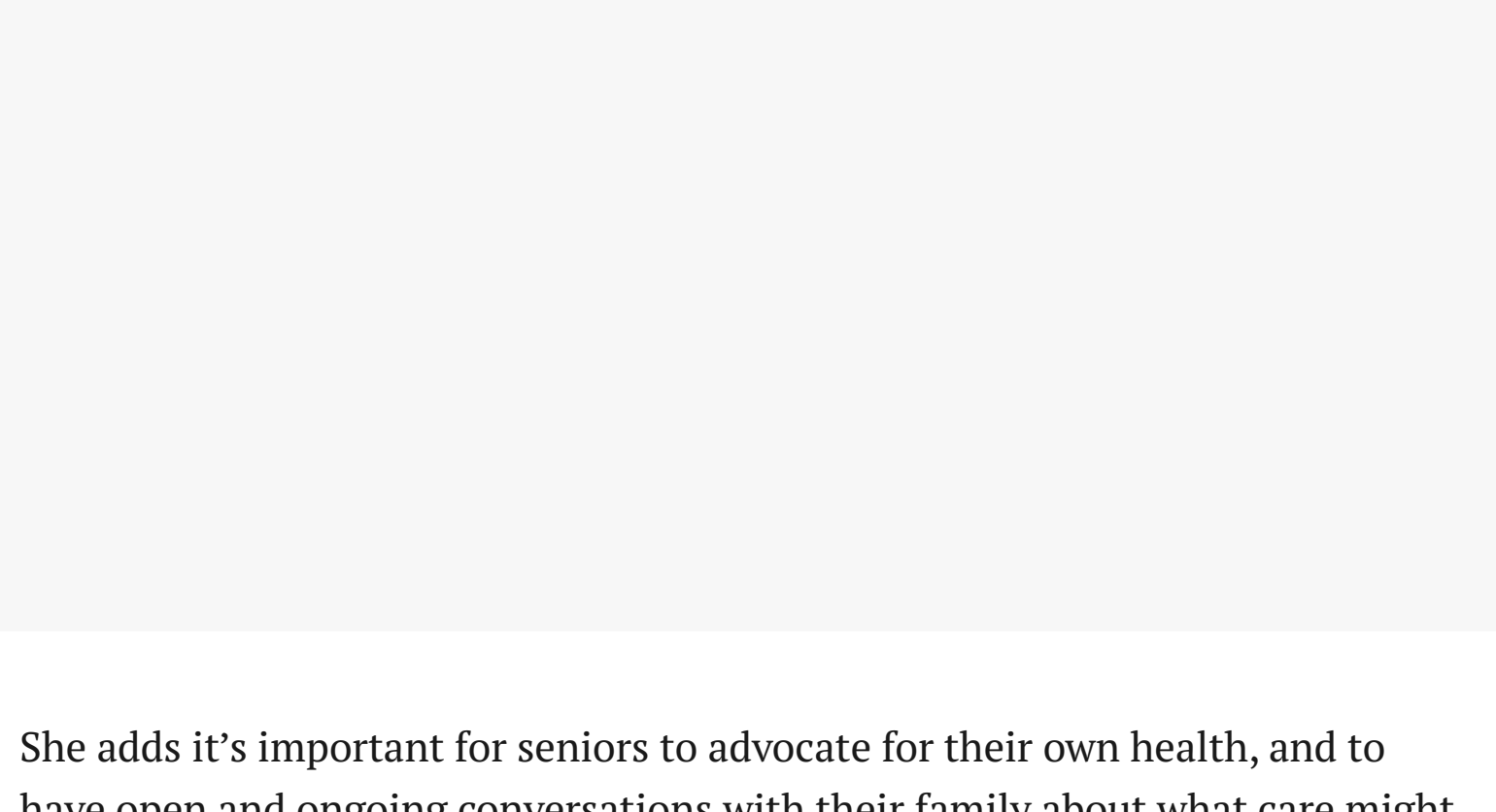
"People worry about neurological conditions as they get older, but most common are things like cardiovascular disease and diabetes," says University of Calgary geriatrician Dr. Zakra Goodarzi. "People also don't often consider the major risks of falls, osteoporosis, arthritis, back problems and mental health — all of these can have a significant impact on an older person's life."



Ways aging Canadians can stay healthy

Goodarzi says there are many measures aging Canadians can take to stay healthy. Exercising — even just walking — can make a big difference, as can having a calcium-rich diet to prevent brittle bones. She also recommends staying on top of regular checkups including those that monitor vision, hearing and oral care, in addition to including that socializing and hobbies are part of one's life.

"I once had a patient whose condition meant she couldn't do a lot of the sewing and quilting she used to do, so her family came up with the idea of having her go to a sewing class and provide verbal instruction to the students," says Goodarzi. "A lot of times it's just about looking at how we can adapt the environment to fit what older adults can do."



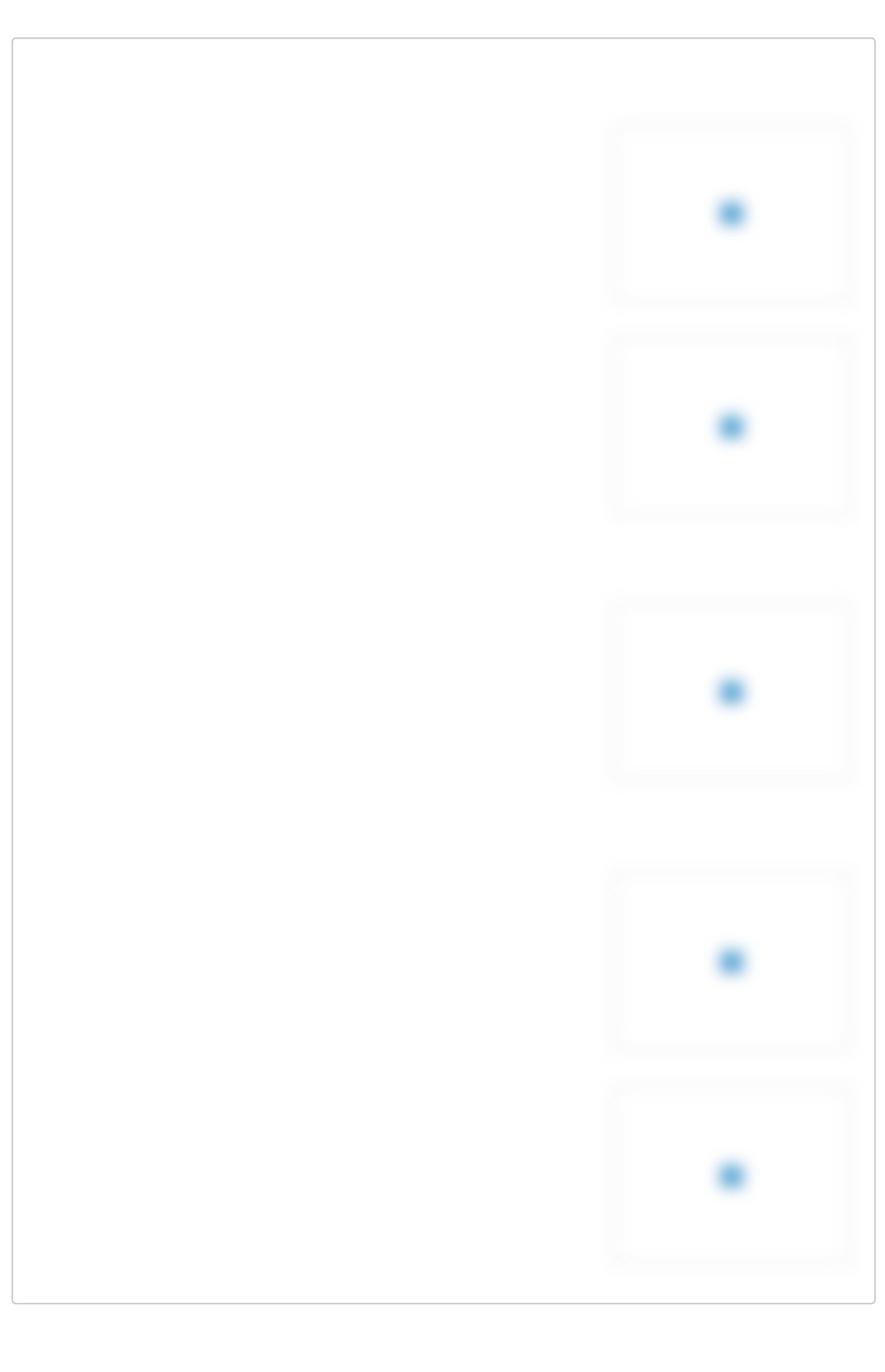
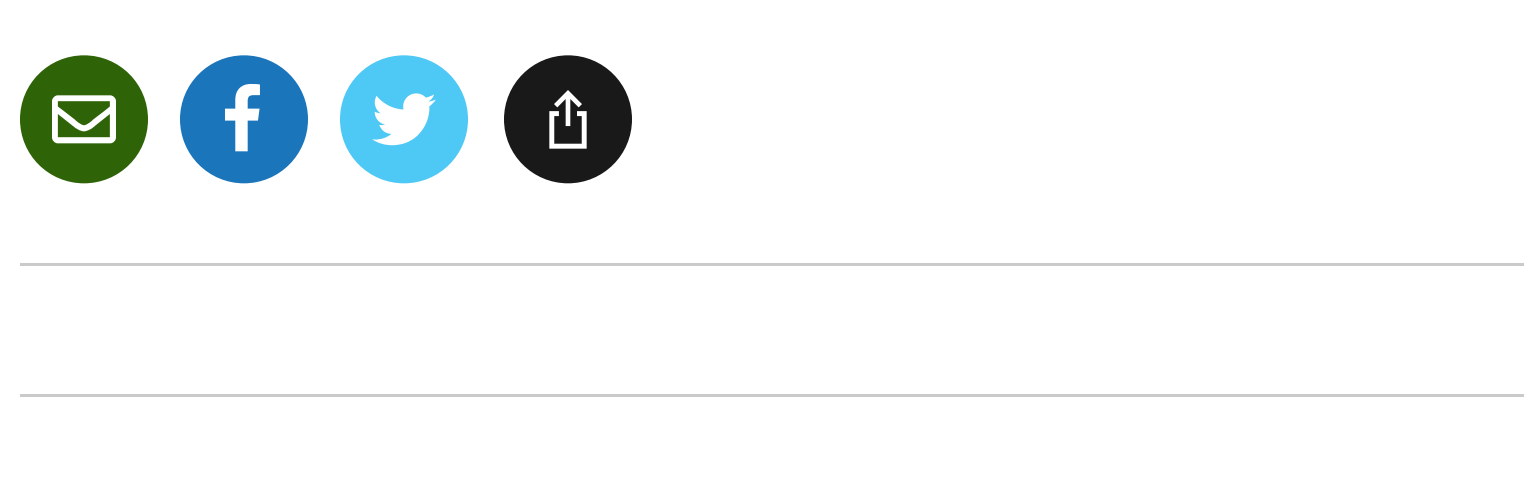
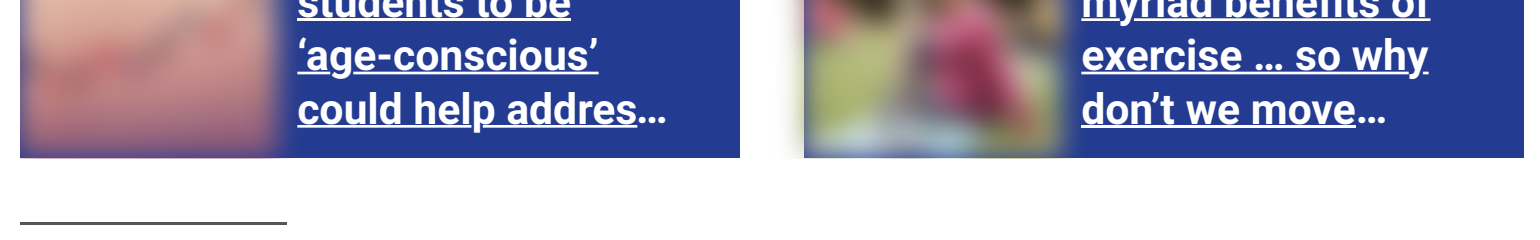
She adds it's important for seniors to advocate for their own health, and to have open and ongoing conversations with their family about what care might look like for them in the future.

The reality is aging can be a positive experience — just look at Ramona Kaptny, who shows no signs of slowing down.

"Health is everything; when you retire, don't just go and sit down on the couch and think maybe you'll play one game of golf or read a book," she says. "That's not what getting older should be about. It's an opportunity to go out and do all kinds of things you've never done before."

Vanessa Hrvatin is a Vancouver-based freelance writer.
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