An internationally renowned geriatrician has warned that loneliness, helplessness and boredom are rampant in WA's aged care homes and that massive cultural change is needed to stop Australia failing its old people.

Bill Thomas, who is visiting WA from the US, developed an alternative way of aged care 20 years ago.

The Eden Alternative, which focuses on de-institutionalising aged care and making centres enlivened environments, has been adopted by 300 facilities worldwide, including four in WA.

He argued that Australia had one of the best-resourced aged care systems and that public money needed to be better spent to stop elderly people being cutting off from society.

"We have a hangover of a medicalised vision of old age," Dr Thomas said.

"In other words, we're still walking around thinking old age is a medical problem. It's not primarily a medical problem. It's primarily a social circumstance. So as a result a lot of our systems are really descended from medical systems and they're not as good at delivering quality relationship-based care."

Dr Thomas was not surprised that complaints and alleged assaults in Australian aged care homes had continued to rise, as reported yesterday.

Current models of care were not suited to elderly people and their families, but more to satisfy funding and system objectives. "Elders suffer unnecessarily from loneliness, helplessness and boredom," he said.

"Medical systems of care concentrate on illness and therapy and treatment and the Eden Alternative-style approach concentrates on the person and the person's well-being."

"Certainly freedom from abuse and neglect is part of that well-being."

Dr Thomas said loneliness, helplessness and boredom were a curable epidemic.

The not-for-profit Eden in Oz trains aged care staff to work according to the Eden Alternative's principles of creating stronger relationships between residents, staff, management and families, and making aged care facilities enlivened environments.

Dr Thomas visited the Mary Chester Centre in Shenton Park, one of the WA facilities accredited by the Eden Alternative.

Dementia sufferer Kevin Powell, a regular visitor to the Eden-accredited Hawthorn House in Albany, said there was always the opportunity for trips out with staff and other visitors. "The staff here are just so wonderful. It's like living in luxury," he said.

Dr Thomas said change was not about increased funding but better use of the existing "significant" resources and making staff feel valued.

"What we really need are better ways of spending the dollars we have," he said.