



PalliativeCare
AUSTRALIA



Joint Position Statement

Spiritual Care: Integral to Palliative Care in Aged Care

May 2017

This is a joint position statement from Palliative Care Australia and Meaningful Ageing Australia.

Palliative Care Australia (PCA) is the national peak body for palliative care in Australia. PCA provides leadership on palliative care policy and community engagement. Working closely with consumers, its Member Organisations and the palliative care and broader health workforce, PCA aims to improve the quality of life and death for people with a life-limiting illness, their families and carers.

Meaningful Ageing Australia is the national peak body for spiritual care and ageing. Meaningful Ageing Australia's mission is to enable access to high quality pastoral and spiritual care for all older people in Australia. We do this by creating high quality, practical resources; and advocacy.

Spirituality is the way we seek and express meaning and purpose; the way we experience our connection to the moment, self, others, our world and the significant or sacred. Spiritual care occurs in a compassionate relationship. It responds to our search for meaning, self-worth, and our need to express ourselves to a sensitive listener.¹

Palliative Care Australia and Meaningful Ageing Australia affirm that:

- Spiritual care is an integral part of palliative care.
- A palliative approach includes spiritual assessment, and the involvement of appropriately trained staff.
- There are gaps in understanding about spirituality and spiritual care across the community, including amongst aged care staff and organisational leaders.
- Further education and specific funding is needed, for spiritual care practitioners to function as part of the team in the palliative approach.
- Religious and spiritual beliefs can affect decision-making about treatment, medicine and self-care as well as expectations of, and relationships, with health and aged care service providers.
- Individualised spirituality-based interventions can lead to lower depression scores and reduced anxiety.
- Cross-disciplinary palliative care is required to address psychosocial and spiritual needs at end-of-life in long-term care settings.

Palliative Care Australia and Meaningful Ageing Australia call for:

- All aged care organisations to recognise the importance of spirituality and spiritual care for people, particularly those receiving end-of-life and palliative care, and respond appropriately to these needs.
- Aged care funding models to include specialised spiritual care support.
- Aged care workforce development to recognise spiritual need, particularly for those receiving end-of-life and palliative care, and improve capability to provide basic spiritual care.
- Consistent spiritual screening and assessment of all people in aged care, particularly at the point of commencing end-of-life and palliative care.
- Australian aged care standards to reflect the importance of meaning, purpose and connectedness for people receiving aged care, as described in the *National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care*.

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¹ Meaningful Ageing Australia "Definitions", Meaningful Ageing, accessed 21 April 2017 <http://meaningfulageing.org.au/definitions>. For the purposes of this document, pastoral care will be referred to as specialist spiritual care.

The Palliative Approach and the *National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care*

More than ten years ago the Australian Government identified a particular need for people with a life-limiting illness or who are dying as a consequence of the ageing process to receive palliative care in residential aged care. The government later released the *Guidelines for a Palliative Approach in Residential Aged Care*² which acknowledged the importance of palliative care for people in community based and residential aged care as they enter the final phase of life.

These guidelines describe the palliative approach and call for an integrated and holistic approach to spiritual care in palliative care for older people. The guidelines emphasise that for both residential and community based care the primary goal of a palliative approach is to improve the person's level of physical comfort and function, and to address their psychological, *spiritual* and social needs.

Building on the government's commitment, Meaningful Ageing Australia developed the *National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care*³ which specify that "spiritual care is an essential component of palliative and end of life care" and that "understanding the older person's spiritual needs is essential to be able to provide spiritual care that is appropriate for each individual". To support this, screening by staff who have had training in spiritual care is recommended, followed by more in-depth care by a spiritual care practitioner or other suitably qualified member of the care team as required.

The importance of spirituality and spiritual care⁴

Religious and spiritual practices and beliefs may impact the way people understand diagnoses, illness, health, loss and recovery, their strategies for coping with illness and resilience, resources and sense of support; enhance pain management, improve outcomes following surgery, and reduce the chance of substance abuse. Numerous studies demonstrate the role of spiritual support in overall wellbeing including health outcomes such as increased hope, greater longevity, coping skills, health-related quality of life, and less anxiety, depression and suicide. Further, self-reported spirituality is a strong predictor of adjustment to ageing and following spiritual care interventions, reports from nursing staff noted that clients seem relaxed, peaceful, grateful, and calm - states believed to aid healing and recuperation or peaceful death.

Medical support with a focus on spiritual care and specialised spiritual care visits is associated with higher quality of life scores near death. People can be better supported to prepare for their final months and weeks of life through reflecting on their life and its contribution, exploring unresolved issues, reinforcing their worth and having their preferences recorded and respected.

Spirituality and grief⁴

Families and staff form a vital part of the older person's palliative care team. For families spiritual care activities are associated with increased overall family satisfaction. Sensitive spiritual support for families in the time leading up to end-of-life and immediately after their loved one has died is essential. Without this in place, normal grief processes are in danger of being de-railed.

Another key finding during the development of the *National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care* was the importance of spiritual support for staff. In order for staff to be fully available and present to the people in their care, they need to be given the opportunity to acknowledge their experiences of being a carer, and allowed to develop and access their own spiritual resources.

Despite the significance of spirituality within end-of-life and palliative care, there is currently no funding specifically for spiritual care, and the availability of spiritual care in aged care is left to the discretion of the care provider. Palliative Care Australia and Meaningful Ageing Australia would like to see the universal acceptance of the importance of spiritual care in aged care, and particularly for those receiving end-of-life care, their families, carers and staff.

² Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, *Guidelines for a Palliative Approach in Residential Aged Care Enhanced Version* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2006), 4.

³ Meaningful Ageing Australia, *National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care* (Parkville: Meaningful Ageing Australia, 2016) Developed in partnership with Spiritual Health Victoria and project managed by the National Ageing Research Institute.

⁴ Comprehensive references can be provided on request. Please contact Meaningful Ageing Australia.