



Meaningful Ageing
AUSTRALIA

Submission

The Reimagined Personal Care Worker Discussion Paper SkillsIQ

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About us

Meaningful Ageing Australia is a growing, charitable, peak organisation dedicated to improving contemporary spiritual care for older people, including those with and without a religious faith. Our vision is for meaning, purpose and connectedness to be part of every ageing journey. Our main activities are evidence-informed practical resources to help organisations understand and respond to the spiritual needs of older people, conducting workshops and providing advocacy. Our members are mainly aged care service providers (118 organisations at the time of writing with nearly 50% not faith-based) and we are primarily funded through membership fees. In 2014-2016 we received a tied grant from the Australian Government to research, develop and publish National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care. In April 2019, we were contracted by the Australian Government to develop and disseminate resources to improve the spiritual literacy of older people when selecting a care provider ('See me. Know me.');

and to assist the aged care sector to better understand the links between the new Aged Care Quality Standards and spiritual care. In 2018-2020 we were the lead partner on the Victorian state government funded project, "The Little Things: intercultural communication skills training for CALD PCAs". We are about to launch a digital product that has been co-designed with older people, PCWs, service providers and academics called 'Meet Akira', which offers support for PCWs to feel valued and understand the contribution their role makes to spiritual care. We are not a faith-based organisation, but rather, we work with organisations who come from a wide range of world views and are united around a common goal of full quality of life for the older people they are serving.

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The content on language, literacy and numeracy was adapted from information provided by Pip Mackey, lead researcher on The Little Things project.

1. Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution to this important piece of work. The discussion paper, *The Reimagined Personal Care Worker*, suggests that we should “explore other questions, start new conversations and discover other possibilities for the reimagined PCW and the recipients for whom they care” rather than making specific recommendations. There are also a series of questions posed by the paper. This submission does address some of the questions you posed, as well as making some new suggestions.

The paper asks us to consider:

- The breadth of care recipients’ needs
- The range and complexity of the skills and capabilities required to meet those needs
- The extent to which an individual worker can meet those needs versus the scope of the role as part of a multi-disciplinary team.

1.1 About spirituality and spiritual care

The World Health Organisation regards spirituality as integral to quality of life.¹ As the peak body for spiritual care and ageing, we know it can come as quite a surprise to many people to find out that spirituality is more than religion. It is about what gives us a purpose to our lives. It is about our sources of meaning and hope, which in turn is intimately related to our connectedness to ourselves, to others and to the world. Australian research has shown that particular aspects of the spiritual dimension of life become more important for many people as they age. These aspects or tasks of ageing are: Finding final meanings in life (What has my life been for? Where do I find meaning now as I grow older?); learning to transcend the disabilities and losses often experienced; affirming relationships (old and new); finding hope in the face of physical and cognitive challenges.² The goal of spiritual care of older people is to affirm the older person in their life journey, to strengthen resilience and support flourishing in whatever circumstances of life the person experiences;³ it also embraces supporting people to die well, whatever that means for them. Essentially, spirituality is about our humanity: that of older people as well as those who are supporting them. Spiritual care is part of every staff role, in different ways.⁴ For the PCW, spiritual care is expressed through the quality of the relationship with each older person, and the ability to make referrals when spiritual needs beyond that which can be met in a day to day relationship presents. Our two minute Quality Standards/Spiritual Care video released last year, *A Message for Personal Carers* (https://youtu.be/H_Ood7RZ41Y), has been very well received by PCWs, not least because it recognises the relational aspect of their work. Awareness of the importance of these connections has now become a matter of acute awareness by the broader community as a result of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2 Aged Care Quality Standards and Spiritual Care

Although your discussion paper did not cover this, spiritual care is also integral to the Aged Care Quality Standards (refer to Standards 1, 2, 3 and 4; Guidance for Service Providers pages 10, 31, 48, 55, 77-80, 85, 122, 125, 137) and makes a major contribution to meaningful work for PCWs and wellbeing for older people.

¹ World Health Organization, 'WHOQOL-SRPB: Field Test Instrument' (World Health Organization, April 2012).

² Elizabeth MacKinlay, *The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing*, Second Edition (London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017).

³ Lydia K. Manning, 'Navigating Hardships in Old Age: Exploring the Relationship Between Spirituality and Resilience in Later Life', *Qualitative Health Research* 23, no. 4 (April 2013): 568–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732312471730>.

⁴ Meaningful Ageing Australia, *National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care* (Parkville: Meaningful Ageing Australia, 2016).

2. The missing context

The reimagined PCW role needs to be underpinned by self-awareness and the ability to connect sensitively with others.

Page four of the consultation paper recognises that “recipients’ assessments of care quality in both home and community and residential care all emphasise the social and emotional dimensions of life and of care, including good relationships with care staff, staff having time to care, feeling at home and feeling valued.” This connects strongly to the literature that makes it clear older people crave meaningful relationships.⁵⁶⁷⁸⁹ The challenge for the reimagined PCW role is to hold this fact alongside the design of a system that is orientated around tasks, and resist the urge to subsume the relational by the pragmatic.

For example, later in the consultation paper under ‘Recipient Expectations: Support and Care’ we were reminded about the Productivity Commission definition of aged care services (p3) and in the ‘international definitions of long-term care’ even the category of ‘social’ was defined by tasks: “shopping, laundry, cooking, performing housework, managing finances and using the telephone or other electronic communicative technologies” (p4). It is well known that the task orientation of the PCW role is one of the major failings of the aged care system.¹⁰ The task focus denies the humanity of the PCW and the older person (your report mentions some of the other drivers for this) and is inevitably one of the causes of plans to leave the system.¹¹

This year, we worked directly with PCWs as part of the development process for ‘Meet Akira’, our digital introduction to spiritual care. The PCW focus group commented that they knew whilst some PCWs are in the job out of necessity for income, for them personally it was to make a positive contribution to the lives of older people. Several of the PCWs at the workshop talked about wanting to care for older people in Australia in lieu of caring for their own grandparents overseas.

In a digital survey we ran in 2018 that included 155 PCWs in various locations around Australia, 148 of them felt that their job makes a difference to the lives of others. Comments included:

“Working in aged care is like giving back to those deserving ones. Repaying our gratitude to those who for any other reasons do what we do. Aged care workers are and should be sympathetic, caring, loving and enthusiastic in giving to the needy. Loves being able to give my time to care to others.”

⁵ Alive!, ‘Making a Difference: Building Positive Relationships between Care Staff and Residents’ (Bristol City Council, n.d.).

⁶ Mathieu Bernard et al., ‘Relationship Between Spirituality, Meaning in Life, Psychological Distress, Wish for Hastened Death, and Their Influence on Quality of Life in Palliative Care Patients’, *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 54, no. 4 (1 October 2017): 514–22, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2017.07.019>.

⁷ Mei-Ling Blank, Sarah Wood, and Richard Egan, ‘Layers of Engagement: Staff Perceptions of Spiritual Care in Residential Aged Care’, *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 30, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 78–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528030.2017.1301844>.

⁸ Richard Fleming, ‘Depression and Spirituality in Australian Aged Care Homes’, *Journal of Religious Gerontology* 13, no. 3–4 (2003): 107–16, https://doi.org/10.1300/J078v13n03_08.

⁹ Louise C. Hawkey and John T. Cacioppo, ‘Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms’, *Annals of Behavioral Medicine: A Publication of the Society of Behavioral Medicine* 40, no. 2 (October 2010): 218–27, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-010-9210-8>.

¹⁰ “Those providers who have demonstrated a commitment to building relationships with people receiving care and their families stood out in sharp relief.” Royal Commission, Australia, ‘Interim Report: Neglect. Vol 1’ (Adelaide, SA: Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, 2019), <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/Pages/interim-report.aspx>. p8.

¹¹ HESTA Survey, cited in *The Reimagined Personal Care Worker*, p10.

“I happy to see people happy and happy when they happy I love my job and respect for people I work for.”

“I love my job & making a difference in somebody's life.”

There were also a number of comments about the challenges:

“My job does not allow us to form a strong bond with the people I care for it is against company policy and I think it is terrible.”

“Not enough time allocated to the care of each individual, aged person, whether in facility or community.”

“Sometimes the service times are not long enough. The client's like having the same carers to build that bond and trust.”

“Love working with elderly, they give more to us than what we do for them.”

“The staff to resident ratios are appalling, overtime is not recognised, we don't get paid nearly enough, considering you're in an office earning \$60+ an hour while I am bathing a body of a women who has passed away, long forgotten by loved ones! There is high staff turnover due to burning out or being harassed, assaulted and bullied at work by residents, colleagues and visitors. Remember that we miss out on spending time with our loved ones because we are too busy taking care of yours!”¹²

The Aged Care Quality Standards rightly puts the older person in the centre of their model.¹³ Arguably, when considering the role of the person who spends by far the most amount of time with each older person, this *relationship* should be in the centre. Not in order to focus on the needs of the PCW but in order to focus on the space between the older person and the PCW.

If someone is accessing aged care services there will of course be tasks that need to be attended to. 100% of these tasks occur in the context of the relationship between the PCW and the older person (and others). Below there is an image that depicts this idea.

¹² Meaningful Ageing Australia, 'Workforce Survey Report' (Internal Report, 29 May 2018).

¹³ Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, 'Aged Care Quality Standards' (Australian Government, Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, 2018), <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/>.

Figure 1: The reimagined PCW is with the older person



The reimagined PCW role needs to be underpinned by self-awareness and the ability to connect sensitively with others in the context of ‘tasks’ that need to be done. This is precisely what a spiritual care approach offers.

2.1 Enabling meaningful relationships

To enable meaningful relationships between PCWs and older people, the PCW curriculum needs to include content on spiritual care. This would cover values, understanding spirituality and its role in self-care and serving others, self-awareness, basic listening skills, and referral processes. This will intersect with emotional and psychological support needs that are also required by the Quality Standards. By beginning with these building blocks, all other content can then be effectively viewed through the lens of valuing older people, and building respectful, compassionate and trusting relationships. Spiritual support principles also strongly encourage a partnership with the older person; and enable engagement with diversity. Below is a figure that depicts this new content and arrangement of the curriculum.

Figure 2: The reimagined PCW is engaged in understanding social, emotional and spiritual support in the context of ageing before other subject matter



2.2 An integral part of the team

The consultation paper notes some of the structural issues associated with the PCW role, including poor remuneration and no expectations regarding professional development. We agree that both of these issues need to be addressed in creating a new future for aged care in Australia. The paper also raises questions about the positioning of the PCW role in the work team. Whatever the other roles that are part of the care and support mix, it is vital that the PCW role is highly valued. They need to be respected as having insight into the wellbeing of the older person they are supporting; and their contribution needs to be considered of the utmost importance. If they are consistently assigned to the same small group of people, they will also develop greater insight and sensitivity into understanding changes that may signal a bigger issue that needs attention and is not easily picked up by people who are unfamiliar with the older person.¹⁴ Their function as a key member of the team is enhanced by education about the various supports that are available to the older

¹⁴ The issue of consistent assignment was raised by the consultation paper. It assumed that this meant the older person was "heavily dependent on one PCW" (p9). There are effective models of consistent assignment that are based around small teams of PCWs. The paper also noted that if the PCW leaves, "it may have a negative effect on the recipient" (p9). The alternative is to offer an *ongoing* 'negative effect' on the older person over many months or years, where they have a series of different staff and do not feel seen or known. Surely the grief experienced of a PCW leaving is a sign that the older person has *benefited* from the relationship, knowing that they were valued. We would be happy to supply more content on this point if desired. Consistent assignment is part of the National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care.

person, and effective supervision that allows for opportunities to discuss what they are seeing and hearing.

The reimagined PCW is considered an integral part of the interdisciplinary team.

3. Language, literacy and numeracy

The reimagined PCW must be trained in pragmatic (relational and practical) language skills.

The consultation rightly points out that “ability to communicate is an absolutely fundamental requirement for all PCWs in whatever setting they work”. We were the lead partner on a major project that sought to address key elements of the communication challenges experienced by PCWs. “The Little Things” project was focussed on CALD PCWs however PCWs from Anglo backgrounds were also found to benefit from the approach we built and trailed.

A person’s language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills requirements to enter the Certificate III Individual Support are generally set as an Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) level 2 or 3 across the board, although the training package does not stipulate a particular level. While an intake assessment of these core skills is important, competence in these skills is not enough to ensure a PCW has the necessary interpersonal and intercultural skills to assist an older person effectively. A PCW requires highly effective pragmatic communication skills in order to relate effectively to a person in this context.

Pragmatic language skills are the rules of communication particular to a given culture. These rules govern what we say and how we say (or don’t say) something to convey meaning in any particular situation. Learning the pragmatic skills of language use in any given community involves developing an understanding of the cultural rules of that particular community whilst also acquiring the necessary linguistic tools to communicate within those cultural expectations. This can take time.

Equally, a native speaker is not always aware that pragmatic competence often needs to be deliberately acquired.¹⁵ We tend to take for granted the assumption that the rules are the same in every culture. This may not be the case and transgression of these rules and misuse of the associated tools can cause serious offence. Problems with grammatical skills, on the other hand, tend to be more easily identified by native speakers of a language as issues connected with developing language use, and tend to be more readily forgiven.¹⁶

A PCW’s work is extremely complex. They deliver the most intimate form of care to a person who may be of a different gender, generation and social, cultural and language background. That person may be in pain, have impaired cognitive function and have impaired communication skills. Marsden and Holmes¹⁷ demonstrated that communication in the aged care workplace requires workers to have pragmatic language skills to relate to others (relational language) and to perform the tasks involved in their work (transactional language, called ‘practical language’ in The Little Things project). These skills are rarely used in isolation.

In June 2018, the Victorian government provided funding through the Workforce Training Innovation Fund to The Little Things project to develop pragmatic, intercultural language

¹⁵ Gabriele Kasper and Kenneth R. Rose, *Pragmatic Development in a Second Language*, Language Learning Monograph Series (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003).

¹⁶ Lynda Yates, ‘Intercultural Communication and the Transnational: Managing Impressions at Work’, *Multilingua* 34, no. 6 (2015): 773–795, <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2014-0063>.

¹⁷ Sharon Marsden and Holmes, ‘Talking to the Elderly in New Zealand Residential Care Settings’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, no. 64 (2014): 17–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.01.006>.

training materials for PCWs from CALD backgrounds working in aged care. The Little Things project used applied linguistics research methods to collect data at participating aged care services and Learn Local Registered Training Organisations (LLRTOs).¹⁸

Research activities included:

- interviews with LLRTOs, aged care management and with nominated PCWs
- observation of nominated PCWs as they worked with older people
- collection and analysis of audio recordings of best practice CALD PCWs working with older people in aged care homes.

A PCW often needs to perform very intimate routine care tasks with older people who may be experiencing physical, emotional, spiritual and cognitive challenges. The PCW and older person often come from a different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. To manage those interactions effectively, a PCW needs to actively relate to that person as they attend to those practical tasks. As a participant in The Little Things pilot training put it:

“Getting to know the residents more especially knowing their likes and dislikes helps the practical side easier too.”

There are specific approaches and language strategies PCWs can use to ensure they relate to an older person in a practical context. How we relate to another person and modify our task-based, or practical language can vary across cultures. For example, in one culture, it may be a show of respect to call an older woman from outside your family ‘Auntie’ or ‘Grandma’, but that is seen as disrespectful in another culture. In some cultures, when one person offers the other a cup of tea, their intonation should stay flat or level, but in Australian English we prefer a rising intonation to make the offer sound like a question.

These instinctive adjustments to spoken language can be very subtle, and we are not always aware we are making them. However, we are impacted if another person doesn’t use them and can judge them as being rude or inappropriate. Other such adjustments and modifications that are included in The Little Things training are how PCWs can:

- have a ‘chat’ to get to know a person
- explain their actions as they go along
- use questions to determine individual preference and soften a direction
- use their voices to demonstrate engagement and soften practical talk
- use ‘little words’ such as Mmm hm, Okay, Right, Now, etc to show interest, indicate an action or transition to another step in a process etc.
- use ‘little words’ to minimise or sweeten an imposition (just, quick, little bit, nice, warm).

These aspects of language use may not be covered in accredited training programs. Along with the use of a person’s facial expressions and body language they can make a profound difference in the quality of care they give. As one participant in the pilot training put it:

“They are part of our everyday work as a personal carer really and we don’t even know that even in such little gesture or words we managed to make our resident feel important and happy.”

¹⁸ The Little Things project was led by Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre (FSNLC) in partnership with Meaningful Ageing Australia. The aged care project participants were Uniting AgeWell, Arcare, Outlook Gardens and Jewish Care Victoria. The Learn Local Registered Training Organisation (LLRTO) project participants were The Centre – Your Community College (Wangaratta), Laverton Community Integrated Services Inc and Westgate Community Initiatives Group Inc. The project was evaluated by aged care researchers from La Trobe University led by Professor Yvonne Wells.

The research was used to develop written and audio-visual training resources. These resources were designed for use in existing PCW training programs and in the workplace. The resources were piloted and trialled a second time with PCWs working at participating aged care organisations and students in LLRTOs. The feedback from the trials was used to improve the resources and for evaluation purposes. Feedback from the trials was extremely positive, for example, over 95% of Training Trial 2 participants said they were either very confident or extremely confident they would be able to apply what they had learnt in their workplace. Further details on the outcome of the trials are available upon request. The Little Things content is ready-to-use as part of the Certificate III.

The reimagined PCW must be trained in pragmatic (relational and practical) language skills.

4. Conclusion

Meaningful Ageing Australia believes PCWs to be the heart and soul of the aged care system, given their sheer numbers and that they spend the greatest time with older people. We are excited at the prospect of reimagining the role and its associated training so that:

- the reimagined PCW role can be underpinned by self-awareness and the ability to connect sensitively with others in the context of 'tasks' that need to be done
- the reimagined PCW is considered an integral part of the interdisciplinary team, and
- the reimagined PCW is trained in pragmatic (relational and practical) language skills.

We have created effective, evidence-based content for current and prospective PCWs over several years for use by our member organisations. We would be delighted to offer our expertise to assist with course design as well as learn guides and assessment materials that are relevant to the content above, for use by the sector at large.