

Let's talk about ageism: Melbourne conference

Friday 9 October 2015
Natasha Marsh
Media and Communications Office

THE CAROLINE Chisholm Centre for Health Ethics (CCHE) held an all-day conference on the topic of 'ageism' on Wednesday 7 October. Over 70 participants, representing hospitals, hospices, advocacy groups, chaplaincy, spirituality officers and individuals simply interested in the issue, gathered at the Catholic Leadership Centre in East Melbourne to hear talks on the theme; 'The Older Person Today: giving and receiving care.'

After the official welcome by Anne Spence, Chairperson for CCHE, Fr Kevin McGovern, CCHE Director, gave the introduction. He drew attention to the Pope Francis' warning that a society that doesn't care for the elderly has no future—as a tree removed from its roots will die.



The keynote address was given by the Hon. Robert Knowles AO. In a honest presentation, which he described as 'off the cuff' but revealed a lifetime of work and thought on the issue, Robert critiqued the ongoing emphasis on 'output' and quick fix solutions evident in health care. 'We need to stop focussing on what we can do to people and look at what we can do for them' he said. He argued that care for elderly persons and mental health are most severely affected by this attitude. 'Policies will only get so far,' he said and called for a cultural shift.

Robert was followed by Judy Gregurke, National Manager of COTA Australia, a national organisation representing the rights, needs and interests of older Australians. She spoke about the growing reality of older people giving care, especially seen with the growing phenomenon of grandparents providing free childcare. She told the story of her mother, who served her family as a carer until into her eighties. In this way, drew attention to the fact that older persons are a group providing significant care themselves.

Maria Egan, Director of Catholic Identity and Mission for Villa Maria Catholic Homes, spoke next on the award winning 'Raise the Bar' initiative, which seeks to improve training and competency among nurses and staff to limit unnecessary emergency trips to hospital. It has been rolled out across several of their facilities to great success.

After lunch, attendees heard from Cheryl De Zilwa, who outlined Calvary Community Care's new 'business-model' of health care. 'We're taking aged care to the market place,' she said.

One of the highlights of the day was a delivery by Dr Karen Hitchcock, general physician at the Alfred Hospital. Known for her wonderful Quarterly Essay 'Dear Life: On caring for the elderly', Karen held attendees spellbound by a poetry-in-prose reflection on the work of a doctor and her experience with her ageing grandmother. She offered a timely challenge and warning on how viewing persons in terms of profit, productivity and output leads directly down the path of euthanasia.

The final presentation was given by David Petty, Executive Officer of Pastoral and Spiritual Care of Older Person. Drawing from a wide range of research, David spoke of

the spiritual significance of old age, and how his ministry supports and encourages the holistic health of the patient by providing the patient with connection to nature, the arts, relationships and religion.

The day ended with a panel discussion of the hypothetical case study of 'Maria and Frank'. An Italian couple married for 55 years, Frank has early onset dementia and has suffered a fall. The panel of five speakers discussed how they would approach caring for the couple. It was an eye opening exercise.

This conference was timely, coming less than one week after the United Nations 25th International Day of Older Persons (1 October) and in the midst of a Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the provision of end of life care.

Photography by Rachel McLaren

Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, <http://www.cam.org.au/News-and-Events/News-and-Events/News/Article/19942/Lets-talk-about-ageism-Melbourne-conference#.VhsYxVKIpaR>, accessed 12 October 2015.

This story was included in the Archdiocesan camnews email sent throughout the Archdiocese on Friday 10 October 2015.