



A display at the ageism conference at the Catholic Leadership Centre, 7 October.

## Let's talk about ageism: Melbourne conference

WORDS • **Natasha Marsh** PICTURE • **Rachel McLaren**

The Caroline Chisholm Centre for Health Ethics held an all-day conference on the topic of ageism on Wednesday 7 October. More than 70 participants, representing hospitals, hospices, advocacy groups, chaplaincy and spirituality officers, gathered at the Catholic Leadership Centre in East Melbourne to hear talks on the theme: 'The older person today: Giving and receiving care'.

The keynote address was given by the Hon. Robert Knowles AO. In an honest presentation, he revealed a lifetime of work and thought on the issue, critiquing 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 reality of older people giving care, in particular the growing phenomenon of grandparents providing free childcare.

Maria Egan, Director of Catholic Identity and Mission for Villa Maria Catholic Homes (VMCH), 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 VMCH 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 marketplace,' she said. Calvary staff also set up an interesting display of assisted technology designed to help frail people remain in their own homes.

One of the highlights of the day was a delivery by Dr Karen Hitchcock, general physician at the Alfred

Hospital. Known for her 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 warning on how viewing people 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 People. Drawing from a wide range of research, David spoke of the spiritual significance of old age, and how his ministry supports holistic patient health by providing connections 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. ●