

ALONE IN A CROWD: Supporting older Australians managing loneliness

An Australian Research Council Linkage – Project for 2007-2009

Bulletin 3 September 2008

This is a bulletin for the dissemination of news and findings for the research project, which will appear periodically.

SYNOPSIS AND NATIONAL BENEFIT

For many older Australians, loneliness is a pressing social and health issue. As Australia's population ages, greater numbers of people 65 years and over will experience negative social, emotional and physical health problems associated with loneliness.

This study will provide comprehensive in-depth insight into the perceptions and understandings of loneliness amongst older people and service providers. Building on this knowledge, solutions to manage loneliness will be developed, implemented and evaluated in collaboration with older people and support/service providers.

THE RESEARCH TEAM

This is a collaborative research project between the Centre for Research into Sustainable Health Care, University of South Australia, Research Centre for Clinical and Community Practice Innovation, Griffith University, SA Aged Care Collaborative (Helping Hand Aged Care Inc., ECH Inc. & Southern Cross Care (SA)) and RSL Care. The research has been funded by the Australian Research Council (LP0774983) under the Linkage Project Scheme for 2007 – 2009.

Professor Julianne Cheek (University of South Australia), Professor Wendy Moyle (Griffith University), Ms Alison Ballantyne (University of South Australia), Dr Mandy Stanley (University of South Australia), Ms Megan Corlis (Helping Hand Aged Care Inc), Ms Deborah Oxlade (RSL Care), Mr Andrew Stoll (ECH Inc) and Ms Beverley Young (Southern Cross Care (SA)).

THE AIM

The aim of the study is to provide understandings of loneliness that can inform support and service providers targeting older Australians managing loneliness.

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Alone in a Crowd is a three stage, multi- method, explorative and descriptive *qualitative* study. The project has received ethics clearance from the University of South Australia and Griffith University (QLD).

Stage One consisted of in-depth interviews with older people and focus groups with service/support providers to gain their understandings and perceptions of loneliness in older people. *Stage Two* involved a series of workshops to develop solutions following on from *Stage One* findings, and implement and evaluate a range of agreed solutions. *Stage Three* will see the development of recommendations drawn from data obtained in each preceding stage of the study.

STAGE ONE

The first stage of the study is now complete. A discussion paper canvassing the conceptual themes arising from *Stage One* data is available.

1. Interviews and Focus Groups

In-depth interviews with older people were completed, comprising of 60 individuals from both South Australia and Queensland. Focus group interviews comprised of eight groups in South Australia and Queensland with participants from a range of aged-care industry professionals, the broader community, and family members of older people receiving support.

Five significant ways of understanding and perceiving loneliness were identified, and are as summarised:

- Loneliness is a personal experience, stigmatised and often kept secret from others.
- Loneliness is influenced by whether older people are able to maintain quality relationships with others.
- Loneliness is influenced by whether older people feel like they are connected to the wider community.
- Loneliness is influenced by time, be it the time of day, or the time of life.
- Loneliness is influenced by older peoples' ability to adapt to losses and changes in life.

CURRENT PROGRESS OF THE PROJECT

STAGE TWO

1. Workshops

Workshops with older people and service/support providers have been completed. Two workshops per State were

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conducted in Queensland in March 2008 and in South Australia in April 2008.

Results from the workshops have enabled the development of a set of guidelines to use when addressing loneliness in older people, guided by the five dimensions identified in *Stage One*. The guidelines have been used to form a broad framework to assist the review of existing strategies/solutions and to guide the implementation of strategies/solutions. The framework is also hoped to provide a foundation for evaluating individual strategies. *Some* of the principles informing the framework include:

- The person and their needs is considered foremost.
- Support is enabled to reduce feeling alone.
- The person feels they have a sense of purpose.
- Time is not just filled up with activities.
- Individualised programs - one size does not fit all.

A range of programs and initiatives designed to enhance, complement or replace existing practice were identified from the workshops and grouped into the following areas:

- Education, e.g., personal tutoring and short courses taught by retired academics or writers.
- Building and maintaining personal needs and connections with others, e.g., visitor schemes.
- Maintaining meaning and purpose in everyday life, e.g. group health programs.
- Strengthening community capacity, e.g., more sitting places allocated for older people.
- Getting around: transport, e.g., coordinated local area free transport network.
- Uses of media, e.g., promoting internet services
- Flexibility and diversity in service provision, e.g., activities connecting past and present.

These relate to the five dimensions of loneliness identified in *Stage One* of the project in a variety of ways.

A separate paper summarising these findings is currently under review and will be circulated once participant feedback has been incorporated.

NATIONAL PROJECT ADVISORY PANEL

The National Project Advisory Panel (NPAP) provides a national inflection to the research. Members include: Ms Val French (Older People Speak Out, QLD); Ms Carolyn Toms (Dept. Veterans' Affairs); Ms Jane Fisher (Connecting

over 50s Throughout Australia (COTA); Ms Kate Jorgenson (Dept. Health & Ageing); and Prof John Snowdon (Dept. Psychological Medicine, University of Sydney). The NPAP met for the second time in July 2008, providing invaluable feedback on the identified strategies/solutions and discussed the development of the framework and principles. The NPAP also identified a number of areas to consider, including issues of sustainability, social isolation, and depression. The next meeting is scheduled for June 2009, to finalise the recommendations arising out of *Stage Three* of the project.

2. Implementing and Evaluating Strategies/Solutions

The next step in *Stage Two* is to use the five dimensions of loneliness to further develop strategies and solutions, and implement and evaluate them at the Partner Organisations. The project team is currently considering these strategies/solutions. Each industry partner is in the process of considering which strategy/solution can be road tested at the given organisation, and the processes required to evaluate and monitor the implemented strategies/solutions to determine whether they are successful, financially realistic and sustainable. This process will inform *Stage Three*, which will focus on formulating recommendations and disseminating strategies and solutions.

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