

# Lifting the lid on Loneliness

2018 Selwyn Gerontology Nursing Conference sheds new light, and fresh thinking, on a subject that many believe is reaching alarming proportions.

If the headlines are to be believed loneliness is an epidemic sweeping the world. New Zealand is not immune. The ramifications on health and wellbeing are significant.

One reason that a group of experts, and over 175 delegates mainly from those nurses involved in age care, gathered together to delve deep into the subject.

Appropriately the gathering took place on 1 October, the internationally recognised United Nations Day of the Older Person.

Speakers came from a cross section of professions and academic backgrounds. Including an older person who shared her own views on loneliness.

The conference honed in on understanding the 'look and feel' of the nature of loneliness. With a particular aim of looking at solutions and practical steps that they could make a difference in the lives of older people.

The focus from a nursing orientation looked at a professional 'duty of care' as well as engaging with people as people.

The problem is on the increase. One in five older adults experience loneliness and across the population there has an estimated 70% increase in experiencing the emotion. On an encouraging note those aged between 65 and 75 were less likely to be lonely.

Delegates were very clear on loneliness being a subjective and negative state and often promoted by a shortage of actual relationships as opposed to expectations.

Resulting in absence of intimate and social needs. People naturally seek out the feeling of being connected and feeling as such.

Fundamentally we are who we are based on social context and connections.

Quality more important than quantity for relationships. Search for meaningful connections.

Those seeking solutions were offered encouragement in understanding, and breaking down, barriers that might produce loneliness.

Such as the inability to 'bounce back' after an injury or loss. Lack of access to transport and places to engage with others. Understanding that aged care facilities can be transformed from being a place of care to a community hub where relationships and inter-generational social networks thrive. Making people understand that it is not a stigma and things can be done to turn the tide.

From a neuroscientific viewpoint loneliness is not a 'natural' state as our brains seek out others. We are wired to be social and just might need help in understanding ways to belong. Moreover, the experienced 'pain' of loneliness was on a par with physical suffering.

### **Who said what about what?**

Dr Sally Keeling, senior lecturer University of Otago focused on loneliness in later life in New Zealand.

Kathy Glasgow, senior advisor—nursing Ministry of Health talked about a nurse's duty of care in dealing with loneliness.

Dr Michal Boyd, health board nurse practitioner and associate professor University of Auckland School of Nursing shared ideas on how to promote resilience in ageing by recognizing frailty.

Professor Merryn Gott, Director of Research, School of Nursing University of Auckland spoke on culturally diverse experiences of social connectedness and befriending services in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Ruth Busch, lawyer, advocate, advisor and community facilitator provided her views on the older person's perspective on loneliness.

A panel discussion chaired by Chris Wilkins from the Selwyn Institute and Sandi Millar, operations and services development manager, community the Selwyn Foundation; Orquidea Mortera, diversional therapist the Selwyn Foundation; Marianne Hornburg, director spiritual care the Selwyn Foundation; Rita Noetzel, programme director Clown Doctors New Zealand, and Ruth Busch highlighted professional perspectives on solutions to loneliness.

Michelle Lee, founder I'm Soul Inc, showed how creating music makes a difference in ageing well.

Nigel Latta, clinical psychologist and TV doyen, honed in on the neuroscience of loneliness and how our brains naturally craved connection.