

## Spirited study aims to help older Australians

University of Western Sydney researchers would like to hear the pastoral care experiences of the elderly, their families and the people who are delivering the service to the community. The information will be used in the first detailed study of services that tend the spiritual needs of older Australians.

Professor Lesley Wilkes from the UWS School of Nursing welcomes input from those closely connected to pastoral care, as understanding the nature of the service is a crucial step to making it even better.

"This is a great opportunity for people who are receiving pastoral care or have loved ones receiving it, to talk about their experiences - whether it's been worthwhile and how it could be improved," Professor Wilkes says.

"Australia's population is rapidly ageing. In less than 50 years, the percentage of older Australians will leap from 12 per cent to almost a quarter of the population. Tending their spiritual needs will be just as important as maintaining their physical health," she says.

"Pastoral care is often considered a low priority in Australia, largely because the benefit to individuals is not well understood. This study will broaden the limited knowledge of the service and provide a much-needed foundation of understanding of the practice and value of pastoral care," Professor Wilkes says.

The study will gather information from face-to-face interviews with elderly people receiving pastoral care, their relatives and the pastoral care workers, to build a picture from each of the three perspectives.

Pastoral care activities will be examined in nursing homes and community care - where people remain in their own homes.

Recruitment has already begun in Southern Cross Care and Our Lady of Consolation residential aged care facilities, and now Professor Wilkes is calling for participants from the general public.

"We would like to interview elderly people who are still living in their homes, are free from cognitive impairment and have been receiving pastoral care for at least six months," Professor Wilkes says.

"The opinions of relatives and community pastoral workers, with two or more years' experience are also being sought."

Pastoral care is already included in the Federal Government's standards for aged care, but Professor Wilkes says little has been done to define it or establish guidelines for its delivery.

"Traditionally, pastoral care has been thought of as a religious activity, but spirituality doesn't necessarily require a belief in God," she says.

"Spirituality can be the intangible quality that gives meaning to our lives, gives us the strength and purpose to live our life to the full.

"The best way to assess the success of tending this vital human quality in older Australians is by listening to those most effected."

The year-long project is believed to be the first of its kind in Australia and has received funding through a UWS Partnership Grant.

UWS researchers will collaborate with industry partners from Southern Cross Care (NSW & ACT) Inc, Our Lady of Consolation Aged Care Services Ltd and the Catholic Institute of Sydney.

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