

ANGELA DEMPSEY -  
PIONEER FOR PALLIATIVE CARE NURSING

Extract from eulogy by Ms Jeni Grubb

'Angela Dempsey once told me about her nurse training at the Mercy Hospital, where the nuns taught her how to look after dying patients, because they did it right. She related to their special way of caring for the dying person, which gave the control back to the patient. She said that the faith learnt from her parents also made her comfortable with the idea that death can be a peaceful gentle thing.'

The palliative care community and the School of Nursing are saddened by the recent death of a pioneering nursing colleague, Ms Angela Dempsey. Angela trained at the Mercy Hospital and worked in a number of key positions in nursing education in the metropolitan area. In 1977 Angela came to Gippsland to take up the Principal Nurse Educator's position at the West Gippsland Hospital. She was active in the efforts of nurses to improve nurse education and establish a career structure for clinical nurses. As a member of the development team for the transfer of nurse education to the tertiary sector, this team managed to introduce a curriculum that was both scientifically rigorous and based on a holistic caring-healing philosophy. In 1985 Angela joined the Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education (later Monash University) as a senior lecturer to implement this curriculum.

However, her long-term passion was for the provision of high quality palliative care in rural communities. Angela decided that if a service was not up and running within 5 years, she would start one in the region. In 1986 a public meeting was organised by the Strezlecki District Health Council to gauge the interest in a palliative care service for the district. Angela attended this meeting and was nominated on to the working party and became a member of the Council.

The feasibility study was launched at a second public meeting in 1988 where Angela explained the proposed model for a home-based service, and was elected as chair of the steering committee. The committee's brief was to set up a palliative

# Pioneer for Palliative Care



Angela Dempsey

care service in the Latrobe Valley. Angela was active in lobbying both the Health Department and other agencies. One year later the committee was granted funding to start the Latrobe Valley Palliative Care Service (LVPCS).

Angela successfully applied for the position of coordinator of LVPCS and, as she recruited a dedicated team, her dream came into fruition. She was able to continue promoting the idea that death is a natural part of life and, if well managed, can be a gentle and peaceful experience.

Angela's ongoing work involved fundraising, team development, training and support of volunteers. She was again active in developing new models for palliative care though her work as a member of the Board of Palliative Care Victoria and in the establishment of the Gippsland consortium. When LVPCS came under the umbrella of Latrobe Community Health Service in 1998, Angela became a Clinical Nurse Consultant for the region for a time as well as continuing to lead the Latrobe Valley Palliative Care program.

In 2002, Angela received a Rural Health Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Health of the Community in recognition of her commitment to the health of rural Victorians over the past 25 years. She has had a major impact on the thinking of health care professionals, bureaucrats, and the public in her quest for the provision of excellent care and the development of models of palliative care in Latrobe Valley and Gippsland. In short Angela Dempsey was a passionate palliative care nurse – a leader, a mentor, a spiritual guide, a friend - who lived by her faith and values to the end. She died peacefully from cancer in her home surrounded by loved ones and palliative care team members in May 2003.

# Angela Dempsey

## PALLIATIVE CARE CONFERENCE AT MONASH UNIVERSITY

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The conference also addressed issues on cultural sensitivities and beliefs of the patients, since these would affect the way they respond to their illnesses and ultimately, their compliance to a specific palliative treatment. Empowering and supporting the family in the care of the terminally ill is crucial. Families play a vital role in the support and care of the terminally ill because they are closest to the patient.

Although hospice care services were introduced in Malaysia a decade ago, public awareness of these services is still low. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which were instrumental in initiating the first palliative care service in the country, faced problems in raising funds to meet the high cost of providing the service and had advocated that palliative care be included in the curriculum of medical and nursing colleges in the country. It

reasoned that this would raise awareness among healthcare professionals on the importance of palliative care besides helping to improve on their skills and knowledge in pain and symptom management.



From left: Puah Sofiah Abdul Rahman (Representative from MNA), Prof Robin Alfredson (HOS, Engineering & Science), Prof. Robert Bignall (Pro-Vice Chancellor, MUM), Dato' Mohd Farid Ariffin (president, National Cancer Council Malaysia), Prof. Margaret O'Connor (Vivian Bullwinkel Chair of Nursing - Palliative Care - School of Nursing, Monash University)

# Malaysia Conference

Besides recognising the enormous challenges faced in raising the quality of palliative care services in the country, the outcomes of the conference have been fruitful in providing further recognition, acknowledgement and continuing development of palliative care in Malaysia.

Professor Margaret O'Connor, Monash University, Peninsula Campus gave the keynote address at the conference. Margaret is the inaugural professor, the Vivian Bullwinkel Chair of Palliative Care Nursing.

## NEW APPOINTMENT TO HONOUR AUSTRALIAN ICON

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Margaret has an enduring interest in combining her clinical interests with her research and education roles, in an effort to bring practice and theory closer together. Professor O'Connor has also recently released the second edition of her book Palliative Care Nursing: A guide to practice.

According to Professor O'Connor the position represents a significant appointment in relation to the development of palliative care in Australia, where there are few such dedicated roles in the nursing sphere.

"I am excited about the prospects of the role in particular because two of the partners are domiciliary services, where I have spent the majority of my career," she explained. "Additionally, the partnership is a unique opportunity for the development of research across settings of care including home care, in-patient hospice and acute care."

Margaret has been involved in the establishment of 3 home based palliative care services in Melbourne over the last 12 years and is currently a Board member of Eastern Palliative Care. In that capacity she chairs both the Clinical Standards Committee and the Ethics Committee. She was a Board Member of Palliative Care Victoria for 10 years, Chairperson from 1996-1999 and on the Council of Palliative Care Australia for 4 years.

The position, while supported by the university, the RDNS, Peninsula Health and Peninsula Hospice Service, is largely funded by the Vivian

Bullwinkel Memorial Fund (VBMF) – a public fund set up to generate financial support through appeals, donations, gifts, bequests and sponsorship.

The memorial fund is continuing to accept donations that will contribute to research and development in the area of palliative care.

School of Nursing head, Associate Professor Tony Barnett said the position was developed with Sister Bullwinkel's philosophies in mind. "By all accounts Sister Bullwinkel was as much a humanitarian as a nurse who constantly put others' needs ahead of her own, dedicating her life to the sick and dying and exploring ways their lives could be made more comfortable," he said. "Even after returning from the suffering inflicted on her and other POWs during World War II, she continued to dedicate her time and effort to the sick and dying."

### For further information contact

Professor Margaret O'Connor on 9904 4053  
or email [margaret.oconnor@med.monash.edu.au](mailto:margaret.oconnor@med.monash.edu.au)

# Inaugural Professor of Palliative Care Nursing