

MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

DATE: MONDAY 4 JANUARY 2010

ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors



Older rural Tasmanians provide insights for new research

Older people living in parts of rural Tasmania are providing important information about their lives and social perspectives which will help improve the way Governments plan health services in rural Australia in the future.

The University of Tasmania, in partnership with the Home and Community Care (HACC) Unit of the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Tasmanian Council on Social Service (TasCOSS), is conducting the research project in the communities of Strahan, Queenstown, Smithton, Stanley, Hellyer, Ouse and Bothwell.

Sixty-nine older people from those areas—33 men and 36 women-- have shared with the research team their experiences of growing older in rural Tasmania.

The research team, led by Prof Judi Walker, the Professor of Rural Health, UTAS Clinical School, and comprising researchers from rural health, geography and nursing, has been funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) to explore what helps older people remain involved in their communities and what contributes to them becoming socially isolated.

“Social relationships and connections with family, friends and community are known to be very important for people to age well, and to enjoy a positive later life,” Prof Walker said.

“If our study can find what causes people to become isolated, and what services or supports might help prevent that, we may be able to provide evidence to policy makers to help design more effective programs”.

The project is midway through its three-year span and its researcher will shortly be interviewing health and community service providers in Circular Head, the West Coast and Central Highlands to ‘match’ their views and understanding with those of the community residents. Some of these will be face-to-face interviews; others will be in focus groups.

Policy makers at local, State and Australian Government levels will also be interviewed.

The findings of the study so far include:

- More than half the older people in the study rated their own health as excellent or good, in spite of a number having chronic health conditions and reduced mobility
- Issues of concern to them were about loss—of spouse, family, friends; of independence and driving licences
- Many reported declining energy and stamina
- There was a significant value attached to social involvement and engagement
- Many felt capable of dealing with change and were able to do this with family and community support; others found dealing with changing circumstances a major challenge
- Older interviewees were often upbeat and resilient about growing older in their communities, although some felt pessimistic following loss

Following completion of the interviews and focus groups, the research team will examine international and national programs and then develop options for new or enhanced services designed to circumvent or slow age-related social dislocation for older people, particularly those living away from major cities.

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