

Media Release

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Enabling: offering new hope in remaining active and in control

NSW Seniors Week (6-13 April) is a time to celebrate the achievements and contributions of senior Australians, but it is also an opportunity to reflect on the changing nature of care required by our ageing population.

Former University of Western Sydney lecturer and Catholic Healthcare Community Services's client Dr Dennis Ottley (65) was diagnosed with Early Onset Dementia in 2003. For the last five years, he has been in the care of wife Dianne (63), who says a new model of care utilised by Catholic Healthcare (the 'Enabling' model of care) has resulted in better quality of care for her husband – and a better quality of life for them both.

So beneficial has the Enabling experience been for Dr and Mrs Ottley, Mrs Ottley currently sits on the Steering Committee for Catholic Healthcare Community Service's Enabling Project.

The Enabling model of care also has the support of Associate Professor Michael Fine from the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion at Macquarie University, who says the approach 'reverses the assumption of helplessness and dependency amongst clients and families' and offers new hope of remaining active and in control, even after the diagnosis of severe disabilities and chronic illnesses.

According to Catholic Healthcare's Community Services General Manager Janis Redford, the Enabling model of care turns the conventional and traditional way of looking at aged care on its head.

"Rather than creating client dependence on a care provider, Enabling, as its name suggests, encourages carers and clients alike to be more empowered and independent, while truly remaining active and connected within the community," Ms Redford said. "In turn, this creates greater senses of wellbeing for carers, clients and the community."

Catholic Healthcare is the largest Catholic provider of residential aged care services and aged community services in Australia. In September 2007, Catholic Healthcare's Community Services launched a 12-month Enabling Project to implement the Enabling philosophy of care across its client base, which now numbers in excess of 5,000 and includes the elderly, financially disadvantaged, people experiencing homelessness, people with a disability, people with a mental illness, carers and children and young people with special needs or who are at risk of harm.

'Climbing a mountain with both hands tied behind my back': Dianne Ottley

Mrs Ottley, who has been associated with Catholic Healthcare's Community Services since 2004, was one of the organisation's first 'Enabling' success stories.

In particular, Mrs Ottley said an internet support group created by Catholic Healthcare's Community Services for Younger Onset Dementia carers became a lifeline for her, especially during her early days of caring for her husband after Dr Ottley's diagnosis.

"I remained in a state of shock for much of the first year following diagnosis," Mrs Ottley recounted. "I spent a year feeling like I was climbing a mountain with both hands tied behind my back."

Mrs Ottley was introduced to Catholic Healthcare's Community Services in 2004, during which time she started attending counselling, carer lunches and was one of the first members of the services's Younger Onset Dementia carers email support group. Dr Ottley, meanwhile, was able to attend therapeutic day centre sessions and Younger Onset Dementia-specific day centre services. In addition he was also assigned a volunteer, taking him for regular outings. Both Dr and Mrs Ottley made use of respite care services.

"The email support group was the greatest lifeline," Mrs Ottley said. "Anybody who has a partner with dementia knows how devastating and isolating it is. You lose friends, your social life, status and some people lose contact with their children, who can find the situation very threatening. I have been very fortunate in having a caring and supportive family."

Mrs Ottley said the email support group was a forum where all the carers could share their frustrations and experiences, where she was also able to learn from more experienced carers about how to go about caring for her husband.

"Dennis is the most gentle and intelligent man – but confusion and frustration can lead to moments of aggression, which are completely out-of-character," Mrs Ottley said. "Hoarding was another of his symptoms: at one stage I had to clean out 200 rusty tin cans from under our swimming pool area. He'd been separating the cans from the rubbish before he'd put our garbage out at night. His loss of memory and loss of skills are also distressing symptoms of this condition."

Mrs Ottley said the email support group eventually evolved beyond the virtual world, as the carers support members and those they cared for began meeting for coffee, going for dinner and other outings together on weekends and public holidays, as well as utilising respite care services as a group.

Mrs Ottley said there had been some deterioration in her husband's condition over the last two years, but much less than expected at diagnosis. In part, she attributes this to another enabling aspect of his care: taking part in dementia research trials at a local hospital.

"Dennis often feels depressed about 'the things he can't do any more' but taking part in research lifts his self-esteem and helps him feel as though he can still give something back to the community," she said.

Mrs Ottley said she was happy to sit on the Enabling Project Steering Committee, and believed that the model of care was as beneficial to carers as it was to Catholic Healthcare Community Services's clients.

"The Enabling message is so important to carers – a sense of control can bring you back from the brink of despair," Mrs Ottley said. "Respite care makes a huge difference, but staying engaged with social and support networks has the most positive impact on your wellbeing. This then has a flow-on benefit to the wellbeing of the person you're caring for.

"Enabling is also about maintaining a personal pursuit or interest. I was determined to pursue my research to complete my Master of Philosophy degree in Art History and Theory at the University of Sydney. Although it took a little longer, I feel that it was good therapy for me.

"And in spite of the limitations brought about by this terrible condition, Dennis has been my greatest supporter. He has always encouraged me when the going is tough."

'Providing hope and opportunity for an ageing society': Associate Professor Michael Fine

Associate Professor Michael Fine, whose current research at Macquarie University's Centre for Research on Social Inclusion concerns the sociology of care, is a strong supporter of the new direction in community care.

"It is often assumed that once we get old and fall ill we are past it, knocking on death's door – and that the best that can be done is to provide care which will maintain people in their own home," Associate Professor Fine said.

"The Enabling approach reverses the assumption of helplessness and dependency amongst clients and their families, and offers new hope that we can remain active and in control even after the diagnosis of severe disabilities and chronic illnesses."

Associate Professor Fine said the approach adopted by the Community Services teams from Catholic Healthcare was already paying off and that increasing numbers of other service providers in NSW have also shown an interest in the new approach. Further, Associate Professor Fine said studies of the application of the approach in West Australia and Victoria, as well as in New Zealand and the United Kingdom, had also shown potential.

"Now we need to make enablement available to as many individuals and families as possible," Associate Professor Fine said. "It holds the promise of better results for clients and, importantly, for their carers and other family members, while at the same time having the potential to ensure that existing services are able to provide assistance.

"At one level, this is just another step in the evolution of community care in Australia – but we can not underestimate the revolutionary potential of the approach. Engaging actively with clients creates more than hope: the new approach gives people the opportunity to regain control where they had lost it. It creates new opportunities to participate in decisions at home, as well as in life outside the home."

Associate Professor Fine said that enablement provided hope and opportunity for the ageing society of the 21st century – a world in which old people are no longer rarities.

"Already we have an historically unprecedented proportion of older people in Australia. In the coming decades, one in four people will be over the age of 65," Associate Professor Fine said.

"The new Enabling approach is a win-win situation for those who are old, for those who need to support them – as family members or by working in community care – as well as for those of us who are concerned that we develop a sustainable and affordable system of high quality care for an ageing world."

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About Community Services

Catholic Healthcare's Community Services works with a diverse range of people and communities to enable and maintain sustainable and vibrant lives. Community Services works with the elderly, financially disadvantaged, people experiencing homelessness, people with a disability, people with a mental illness, carers and children and young people with special needs or who are at risk of harm.

About Catholic Healthcare

Established in 1994, Catholic Healthcare is an experienced, not-for-profit provider of aged, healthcare and community services across NSW and south-east Queensland. Catholic Healthcare employs more than 3,000 staff and operates 40 residential aged care communities, 10 seniors living communities, three hospitals and provides community services to more than 5,000 people in their homes and communities.

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