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When I'm old I'll still want soft poached eggs

Stephen Judd
July 10, 2010

Everyone has different rhythms, preferences and choices. I like having breakfast at a table reading the newspaper, while other strange people like breakfast in bed, with all the crumbs and bacon in the sheets.

But if an older Australian moves into residential care, he has to be up and dressed at 8am. Rather than being allowed to sleep in, older citizens are obliged to conform to a regimented schedule revolving around what suits staff or operational efficiencies, rather than continuing to enjoy the daily rhythms most people have enjoyed for many years.

Many relatives are pleased to hear a home provides activities to enjoy, and the accreditation agency likes it too. But do older citizens enjoy them? My aunt was a sociable woman, but in an aged care facility she had a violent reaction to being almost compelled to participate in group activities. "It makes me feel like a child at a compulsory school camp."

She is not alone. In Melbourne a study of 25 carers and 25 residents from five hostels found that although participation was valued and encouraged by carers, residents were left feeling isolated, compromised and as though they were not at home.

Should I end up in a nursing home, it would be far better to take me for a game of golf, even if I might only be able to manage the putting green and a couple of clubhouse drinks. It would be far better for the maintenance man to take the former manager of a hardware store with him when he visits Bunnings. Far better to install a piano for the one-time pianist, or a shed for the bloke who used to potter outside until summoned for meals.

But too often group activities confirm for residents that they have lost control of their lives.

One of the fundamental rights of an Australian citizen - at least for one not in prison for a crime - is that of liberty, the right not to be restrained. But for older Australians in aged care, that right is being ignored with the support of a paternalistic federal government.

So-called wandering by people with dementia can have tragic consequences, but much research has concluded it is not so much a symptom of dementia, but a sign of distress. The focus is on stopping the person "wandering" rather than stopping the distress causing it.

No one seems to look at the obvious: if you did not feel "at home" and comfortable, wanting to leave would be a perfectly sensible thing to do. I wonder how long it will be before an older Australian takes legal action against a service provider - and the Government - for illegal restraint?

Another area in which older Australians are missing out on things we take for granted is food. One of the great ways we socialise is when eating, and most of us can choose what, when and how to eat. Yet those in aged care are increasingly having these freedoms to choose eroded.

Take the Vulnerable Persons Food Safety Scheme, which covers people in aged care facilities and lists certain foods as "high risk": cold meats, pate, seafood, soft cheeses, fresh cut fruit and vegetables, soft-serve ice cream and soft eggs. What have we come to when an older person in a nursing home can't have lettuce and rockmelon?

3 August, 2010 12:27PM AEST

How homely are retirement homes?

It's almost inevitable that you or someone you know aged care, but just how homely are our retirement hc

Dr Stephen Judd is CEO of Hammond Care, a charitable, independent dementia and aged care specialist care company and he suggests that it is hard for some seniors to even get a two-minute poached egg due to their classification as 'high risk food'.

Other items deemed high risk by regulations include some fresh fruit and vegetables and cold meats, so retirees are being served powdered eggs, bleached vegetables, or tinned fruit.

Dr Judd believes this needs to change and that people should be allowed control of their own lives and should be able to choose the food they eat.

"Aged care is over-regulated," he observes.

"I think consumers should be more vocal about what they want," he adds.

Some solution would be a more collaborative approach to aged care, Dr Judd suggests, and approach that would take in to account the desires of those in the home as well as their loved ones.

Before we get too disheartened about our aged care system, though, Dr Judd remarks, positively, that "we do have a jolly good aged care system but the challenge is to make it better.

The Sydney Morning Herald

Breaking News National

Aged care residents 'voiceless citizens'

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AAP

Australia's aged care residents have become "voiceless citizens" who are told what time to get up and what to eat, an international dementia conference has been told.

Dr Stephen Judd, chief executive officer of aged care provider HammondCare, was scathing of the aged care industry in his address to the Eighth Biennial International Conference on Dementia in Sydney on Wednesday.

Dr Judd said most aged care residents were living lives devoid of personal freedoms.

"Does anyone seriously believe that an older citizen in residential aged care has not had their rights eroded, however subtly, by being obliged to conform to a regimented schedule?" he said.

He said schedules in aged care facilities were dictated by what best suited staff and operational objectives, not what best suited residents.

He said many older Australians were forced to get up and be dressed by 8am every morning.

"Why can't they sleep in?" he said.

"Despite our best efforts we start to think differently about older people, and particularly those with dementia, to the point where they become voiceless citizens."

He said food was heavily regulated, with seafood, soft cheese, fresh cut fruit and vegetables and soft eggs classified as high risk for all aged care residents, regardless of their health.

"... the Food Authority does not say you can't serve a poached egg, just that it should be cooked at 62 degrees for 17 minutes," he said.

"That's not a poached egg, that's an organic piece of pottery that's been fired and come out of a kiln."

He said his aunty who lives in residential care feels like a kid at a compulsory school camp because she's forced to take part in group activities.

A recent survey in Melbourne found residents were left feeling isolated and compromised by this pressure to conform, he said.

His comments come ahead of the release of a new Queensland discussion about protecting the elderly from physical, emotional, financial and other forms of abuse.

The paper, by the Public Advocate of Queensland and the Queensland Law Society, and entitled Elder Abuse: How well does the law in Queensland cope?, will be released in Brisbane on Thursday.

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