

# Growing Older and Keeping Healthy in Rural Tasmania

March 2010



## About this Project:

This is the first newsletter from our research team looking into aspects of growing older and keeping healthy in rural Tasmania.

The team is looking at the importance of social connections with family, friends and community as people grow older. It is also exploring possible “triggers” which may result in people becoming less connected with these important parts of their lives as they grow older in country areas.

The research is focused around older rural people, service providers and policy makers.

Once the research team has a better understanding of the Tasmanian rural situation, their work will seek to develop more flexible community-based supports for older people and to develop a framework for policies to meet their needs into the future.

Interviews have already been held with 69 older people from the communities of Strahan, Queenstown, Smithton, Stanley, Ouse and Bothwell - 33 men and 36 women.

It is hoped that the information they have shared about their own experiences will one day improve the way Governments and communities plan

health services in rural Australia into the future.

**The project is being conducted by the University of Tasmania, in partnership with the Home and Community Care (HACC) Program in the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Tasmanian Council on Social Service (TasCOSS).**

More detailed information about the project and the team members is provided on the back page and on our website.

This project is an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage research project.

## Our Thanks:



- The research team particularly wants to thank the 69 older people from the communities of Strahan, Queenstown, Smithton, Stanley, Ouse and Bothwell who have shared their experiences of growing older in rural Tasmania with the research team.
- Managers of services in these communities, together with Commonwealth and State health policy makers, are also informing the research. We want to thank them enormously for sharing their experiences and thoughts with the research team.
- We are also grateful to the rural service providers and Commonwealth and State policy leaders who shared their views about options for the future.

## Early Findings - Phase One of the Project

The first phase of the study has focused on the communities mentioned above - Strahan, Queenstown, Smithton, Stanley, Ouse and Bothwell. These communities have characteristics which will assist the researchers in identifying similarities and

differences between communities for their older residents. Older people in these areas have provided important information about their lives and experiences of ageing.

Findings from this part of the study are

confirming that social relationships and connections with family, friends and community are very important for people to age well, and to enjoy a positive later life.

As well, these findings have shown that:

- *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 connections and community involvement;*
- *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; and*
- *Older participants were often upbeat and resilient about growing older in their communities, although some felt pessimistic following loss.*

## More About the Project:

The research is divided into three phases:

- PHASE ONE:** Building an understanding of the age-related disengagement process through interviews with older rural people, rural service providers and policy makers (2008/2009).
- PHASE TWO:** Investigating available relevant policies, models and services nationally and internationally (first half 2010).
- PHASE THREE:** Development of a framework for policy and service intervention options (late 2010).

As mentioned, Phase One is now nearing completion, with work beginning on Phase Two.

## The Project Team:

The project research team, is led by Professor Judi Walker, the Professor of Rural Health at the University of Tasmania (UTAS).

Team members are:

- Dr Peter Orpin, Senior Research Fellow Rural Health, UTAS
- Dr Elaine Stratford, Head of School, Geography and Environmental Studies, UTAS
- Associate Professor Andrew Robinson, School of Nursing and Midwifery, UTAS
- Ms Kim Boyer, Senior Research Fellow, Rural Health, UTAS
- Ms Janet Carty, DHHS Home and Community Care Program (HACC) representative
- Ms Nadia Mahjouri, DHHS and Project Linkage Industry Fellow
- Dr Carol Patterson, researcher, TasCOSS
- Dr Hazel Baynes, post-doctoral research fellow.

The project also has a Reference Group to provide external guidance. The Reference Group includes two noted community members, Mrs Mary Binks and Mr Barkley Walker, together with Associate Professor Dom Geraghty from the UTAS School of Human Life Sciences, senior Commonwealth and State policy leaders, including Ms Wendy Quinn (Department of Health and Human Services) , and some members of the research team.

Key members of the research team and policy advisers have also formed an informal Policy Group to ensure the project remains aware of the current changes to health policies and practices, and to assist in the translation of the research findings into policy and practice.



*L to R: Prof Judi Walker, Ms Kim Boyer, Mrs Mary Binks, Mr Martin Gibson (representing TasCOSS), Ms Wendy Quinn (DHHS), Dr Hazel Baynes and Dr Peter Orpin*

**For more information about the project:**

**Visit our website at [www.rcs.utas.edu.au/growingolder](http://www.rcs.utas.edu.au/growingolder)**

**Or contact:**

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