



**Australian Government**

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## UnitingCare Ageing Staff Conference

### Responding to the 'New Aged' in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Rhonda Parker**  
**Aged Care Commissioner**

**Check against delivery**

## Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to be with you today, and for the opportunity to contribute to your conference as you participate in your organisation's journey, one inspired by a vision.

In the ten minutes allocated to me in this plenary about your customer, the best I can do is challenge your thinking, rather than provide answers. I'm always doubtful about those who profess to categorically know the answers to the ageing of our population. This is uncharted territory and there is no template for where we are going.

### Who is the New Aged Health and Care Consumer?

Who is the 75 or 85 year old that you will be providing services to in the next decade - the sort of person you will become if you are fortunate enough to age? If 82 is now the average life expectancy, who can we call 'old', and what does your customer want? Let's have a look at a few of the things we need to consider.

- Slide: 1909 - 65 retirement age
- 58 was the average length of life.

We need to re-think age, what it is, and what it is not.

- Slide: Ageing does not prescribe decline as we have previously understood it.

For example, internationally, researchers agree that of the physical decline in later life, some 70 per cent is not due to age. Research data reveals we are not pre-programmed to decline in ways we previously understood.

There is much we do that increases the chance of ageing poorly. There is much we can do to improve our chances of ageing well.

- Slide: No-one is terrified about growing old in itself; the terror is in becoming clinically dependant.

There are two realities about death – one is determined, one is not. The first reality is we are all going to die at some point. We all know that and, more or less, accept it. What isn't determined, the second reality, is how long our period of morbidity or dieing will be.

The 'New Aged' consumers of health and care services in this century will require services for both of these realities.

Slide: Australians can expect – and should plan for – two 30 year periods in their adult life:

20-50 years, 50-80 years.

Health and care services for older people can no longer be characterised as sitting at the periphery of the health system. Fifty-one per cent of all hospital bed days are used by those over 65 years of age.

Add to that the use of pharmaceuticals, allied health, sub-acute, palliative and ACAT-assessed services, and there is no denying the over 65s are mainstream, majority customers of the health and care system. And they want to live well, and die well.

Research has identified the 3 characteristic features of those who maintain quality in later life. The 3 features are that the older person:

- Slide:
- establishes and maintains a low risk of disease
- maintains a high level of physical and cognitive function; and
- maintains engagement through productive activity and meaningful relationships.

Your business, the business of UnitingCare, has a role in each of these characteristic features.

The 'New Aged' want to live as young as possible, as long as possible. They will understand that

- Slide: 'changes that a doctor or scientist once might have labelled an inevitable part of growing older are now considered pathology, not biology.'

The 75, 85 and 95 year olds you deal with are the 'New Aged'. They will re-define what age is and what being 75, 85, 95 and beyond is. I believe they will eradicate the notion of a 'use by date'.

And while they do that, they will need – and want – support services to help them realise the potential of their later years.

Organisations like yours are well-positioned to respond to those consumer demands, as long as you build your services on a contemporary understanding of what your customers want, not what they wanted ten or twenty years ago.

Good luck to you as the UnitingCare team, as you continue your inspired journey and seek to position your business to respond to your 'New Aged' customers.