

Aging, and Health Policy – Don't Come Back

It is claimed that no one ever died of old age. Yet it is a universal truth that over time the human body will go into decline and we will die of disease which kicks in earlier to a neglected body.

It makes sense that as we are living longer we each take care so we do not become a burden to ourselves, our families, the community and to the Health System over an extended period.

Three bouts with cancer in my fifth decade between my husband and me have made us particularly vigilant about body maintenance. So when I turned 70 and was told by my GP I would no longer be reminded officially it was time for my two yearly Pap Smear, my eyebrows went up. 'It's okay' said the GP, 'you can still come in if you wish, we just won't be notifying you anymore that a smear is due.'

Soon after that revelation I went to see my gastro-enterologist to arrange for a 5 yearly colonoscopy. The procedure was completed, there were no problems and as I was leaving, my doctor said, "You don't need to come back again." "You mean, ever?" I enquired. "Yes' he replied. "But my father had bowel cancer in his mid-70s, that's why I come in for regular check-ups." "Okay," he said, "you can come back."

A few months later I had my annual mammogram, and my consulting specialist of 20 years standing said, "You're cancer free after all this time, so you don't need to come back again."

Having served 10 years as Chair of the Breast Cancer Network of Australia I am familiar with breast cancer statistics; I know that a woman's risk of breast cancer increases with age, and that if you have had breast cancer before – as I had 23 years ago - your risk is higher. So I pressed my physician to explain what he was talking about.

It evolved that he was retiring and wouldn't be working a year from now. I asked what he was doing with his records. "I haven't thought about that", he said, "I'll probably put them under the house." "What about giving them to your patients?" I suggested. "I'll think about that," was the response. I knew from his lack of interest that the earwigs and the silverfish would win the day and that my records of more than 20 years, along with countless others were destined to rot under a house.

A little checking among my peers indicated my experience of turning 70 was not unique. Not all, but enough of my 70 year old friends had been given the same message from doctors that I had received. Enough for me to conclude the medical system wants to cull the over 70's from those receiving regular expensive procedures because the expenditure is not considered cost effective.

I put this question to my GP who explained gently, that life expectancy statistics do cut in about the time it would take a new cancer to develop - if a person is cancer free at 70. He effectively confirmed we are deemed by the medical profession, unofficially at least, to have had our whack and if cancer or anything else catches up after 70, we can't complain too much if we fall off the perch – we've had a good innings as they say.

The Australian Breast Cancer Lobby with its pink banners has demonstrated over a 12 year period what changes intelligent, informed consumers can accomplish in health policy by getting their message out to the public. The result is earlier detection and more effective care for those diagnosed with breast cancer. Grey advocates now need to bring about change for our compatriots.

Living longer lives is one of the great achievements of the 20th Century. The policy aim should be to increase the period of life that is free from disability and disease for all. An enlightened approach to health reform could mean the extended years that medical science is largely responsible for giving us can be put to a useful social and individual purpose.

Dr Patricia Edgar AM was the Founding Chair of the Breast Cancer Network of Australia