

Doctors call for death education in schools

Queensland doctors are calling for death education to be taught in the classroom in a bid to demystify the processes of ageing and dying.

AMA Queensland Chair of General Practice Dr Richard Kidd said the number of people aged over 65 was growing at a faster rate than younger age groupsⁱ, putting the onus of end-of-life care increasingly on the next generations.

“Young people need to be educated about medical, legal and other issues that surround ageing and dying so they are capable of making informed choices when the time comes,” Dr Kidd said.

“More than any other generation, they will need to understand Advance Care Plans where their loved ones decide how they want care to be delivered at the end of their lives. Young people will also need to know how to make a will.

“Including these sorts of issues or death education in science, legal studies, health and other school subjects will help build this understanding.”

Dr Kidd said people should be creating Advance Care Plans as early as adolescence.

“We’ve seen sad cases of young men getting terrible injuries playing sport and it would have helped their families and doctors enormously if they knew how he wanted to be cared for in his last days,” he said.

Palliative Care Queensland CEO Shyla Mills said death education in schools would also assist young people to become more resilient about loss, ageing, dying and grief.

“They will be far more likely to be involved in the dying process of their relatives, work colleagues and friends than previous generations,” Ms Mills said. “They will need to be very resilient, more compassionate and develop a positive, proactive approach to death.

“While there is pressure on educators to add more material into the school curriculum, death is our only 100 per cent guarantee in life and the effects of our ageing population will be felt most by those at school today.”

Dr Kidd said learning about ageing and the process of dying in an educational forum would also prevent young people from adopting their parents’ anxieties and concerns about the issue.

“In many families, death is a bit of a taboo topic that only gets discussed at crisis points,” he said. “Death education at school would help remove any stigma.”

Australian Bureau Statistics reveal the proportion of people aged 65 years and over increased from 12 per cent to 15.3 per cent in the decade from 1996, with projections this population group would grow even more rapidly over the next ten years as baby boomers continued to ageⁱⁱ.

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ⁱ <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/3101.0Feature%20Article1Jun%202016>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/3101.0Feature%20Article1Jun%202016>