

# Beyond the numbers

A project that helps to demystify the numerics of ageing is seeing much success

In April 2012, The Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at The University of Western Australia and the Bethanie Group launched a project that aimed at bridging the gap between the classroom and residential aged care.

A key part of 'Beyond the Teaching Nursing Home – A Community Partnership of Learning & Care' is the contribution of older adults to health professional education. This community of learning and care provides medicine, nursing, podiatric medicine, social work and other health professional students the opportunity to engage with older people in order to understand their specific health needs.

Captained by Nursing in the School of Population Health at UWA and funded by Health Workforce Australia, the project saw the unoccupied space of the former Bethanie Joondanna Nursing Home refurbished to create a clinical learning environment to facilitate health professional education and training.

Associate Professor Rosemary Saunders, from UWA's School of Population Health said the project was tracking successfully.

"Certainly since the beginning, we've had an increased interest from the students as well as the residents who have been participating," A/Prof Saunders said.

Located adjacent to two residential aged care hostels and independent living units, the project supports the clinical training of registered and enrolled nursing students, medicine students, podiatric medicine students and social work students

So far this year, 158 UWA medical students have participated in the focused learning activity as part of their fourth-year medical program geriatric rotation.

Student Alvin Lian agreed that while there is a tendency towards pessimism during a geriatrics term, the activity was welcomed.

"We see our patients at their worst, in pain, delirium and fear, crammed in an unfamiliar place and shorn of their social supports," he said

"Yet the chance to meet with aged-care patients in their homes, amongst their friends and loved ones is a very real privilege. "

"Moreover, the insight it provides is tremendous as it translates the difference that good nursing and medicine can make from academic statistics (the rather soulless talk of care plans and quality-adjusted life years) into smiles, and jokes and cheerfulness," Mr Lian added.

A/Prof Saunders agrees that the project helps to demystify the numerics of ageing.

"The objective is for students to gain an understanding of the residential aged care environment by interviewing a resident.

"This is especially important in the case of a residential aged care patient being transferred to the acute sector and back again.

"It is important for the attending medical practitioner to have an understanding of the environment from which the patient comes and the resources available in that environment to support the patient once they return.

"It is also crucial to realise that the aged care facility is the patient's home and where possible, care needs to be provided in that environment of their home."

Professor Christopher Etherton-Ber from UWA who coordinates the fourth-year geriatric rotation, explained the value of the activity lay in the opportunity for structured engagement with the residents.

"This is in the context of informal (unstructured) visits to care facilities being increasingly difficult to organise," Professor Etherton-Ber said.

"The project gives students a community-based perspective from older people who have many retained strengths and are often a model of successful ageing."

Residents at Bethanie's Joondanna Nursing Home range in age from 63 to 103, and their response to the project has been extremely encouraging.

"The residents enjoy participating in the activity and understand its value," A/Prof Saunders pointed out.

"They understand they are contributing to student communication and also to the latter's professional attitude to patients.

Professor Ether Beer added the project encouraged two-way learning and benefit in a meaningful exchange.

"There is possibly value and scope for the activity to be expanded and we are hoping that it will endure (possibly in a slightly different format) in the new MD curriculum," he concluded. ■



**Gaining insight:** A sub-group of the larger cohort of fourth-year medical students at the Bethanie Joondanna Nursing Home.