

Margaret O'Connor AM



Margaret O'Connor AM is an Emeritus Professor, nurse and former President of Palliative Care Victoria. Her passion for palliative care really developed after she helped care for her dad at home in the late 1970's, before the establishment of community-based palliative care services.

Margaret began working in palliative care in 1986. Her first job was with Melbourne City Mission in north Fitzroy which at the time covered much of Melbourne. She describes it as 'very difficult at times' given the large area they covered and being on call 24 hours a day.

"The experience of looking after my dad was pivotal in my interest. I think the privilege of working in people's homes was something that's never left me really."

"In 1989 or so, I was enticed to apply for a position with an organisation called Melbourne Eastern Palliative Care in the Doncaster region. I was on the foundation staff there and actually helped establish the service. It was very successful."

"In 1992, I was again enticed by a new position at Caritas Christi in Kew, the hospice that's been there since 1939. There was a desire to expand into home care, so I set that service up, with Caritas Christi and the Order of Malta as partners. That was a very interesting experience because many staff thought there was no better place to die than at Caritas, so, a service that helped people to die in their own home was quite a challenge!"

Margaret stayed at Caritas Christi until 1998, when the service joined with a number of others to become Eastern Palliative Care. She was completing her doctorate at the time, when an opportunity arose to work in education. Margaret taught at La Trobe University, before becoming a professor of palliative care at Monash University where she worked for 12 years.

In the years following, Margaret returned to Melbourne City Mission as a clinical researcher, and dipped back into education as the Inaugural Professor of Nursing at Swinburne University. She was also the president of Palliative Care Australia from 2006 – 2010, before once again coming back to Melbourne City Mission part-time in 2017.

“I’m currently at the clinical coalface at Melbourne City Mission, which I absolutely love because I understand it. I’ve been in a clinical role, visiting people at home. I get to listen to conversations, talk to people about what issues they’re interested in and concerned about and put that into a research framework so that we can publish from that.”

‘I’m about advocating for what people need and seek at the end of life.’

When asked whether there was a particular moment that stood out to Margaret throughout her career to date, she mentioned that her Doctoral studies served as an incredibly important turning point.

“Taking a left-hand turn into academia had quite an impact on me. To assist other people to develop their skills to advance their career was a wonderful way of using my role, my power.”

Palliative care into the future

It is clear that Margaret is passionate about educating the next generation. She firmly believes that more can be done to further assist and prepare students coming out of university for the sector.

“We can’t underestimate the huge achievement of palliative care being recognised as its own discipline. But even though we have a national palliative care curriculum for all undergraduate health professions, with all resources online, I’m not sure that’s caught on as well as it should have.”

“I think we still have medical and health science students coming out of university not understanding what palliative care is and the role of it and how they can work in palliative care services. It’s a shame because we have access to the best expertise here. There’s no excuse for someone dying a poor death in Australia.”