

By Louise Forster

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Not being able to go on an interstate holiday or missing the Grand Final at the MCG might be some people's biggest recent bugbear, but for those of us with ageing parents in different states (or overseas) the reality is a lot more sobering.

Amy, will turn 90 at the end of the month and she'll be spending it without seeing friends or family. This is the reality for thousands of Australians, and has a huge impact on people's wellbeing. Four weeks ago Amy fell at home, and broke her left hip. After a short stay in a Perth hospital, she was transferred to a nearby rehabilitation centre, which is part of the Australian government's Transitional Care Programme. With Amy in rehab, her Home Care Package is put on hold, and communication with her care provider has been scant. The rehab centre only supports contact with Amy's next of kin: her 93 year-old sister and one of her daughters. Friends and Amy's second daughter haven't been able to call. Advocare can help inform family members about people's rights in aged care, hospital and transitional care. If an older person has decision making capacity, we can support them with their requests – for example being able to speak to friends and family (not just next of kin) on a significant birthday, or any day.

Most hip fractures happen at home (47 percent). For every 40 hip fractures that happen every day in Australia, two of those people will not return home. The short and long term consequences of hip fractures are grave.

At this point it's not looking like Amy will be able to go home, so the family are navigating the complex world of finding a residential aged care facility for mum to transition to. The system is so complex a broker is recommended, to help the family manage the process from interstate.

Amy's two daughters are in lockdown in New South Wales, and can't get to Perth to support their mum through this transition, or be there in person, nor celebrate her 90th birthday with her. This is the stark reality for many Australians right now.

There is a lot of research about the impact of social isolation and loneliness. It's associated with ongoing reduction in feelings of wellbeing and life satisfaction and more frequent social contact is associated with higher life satisfaction and overall health. Social isolation has been linked to mental illness, emotional distress, poor health behaviours like smoking, physical inactivity and poor sleep, and is linked to biological effects, including high blood pressure and poorer immune function. The risk of premature death associated with social isolation and loneliness is similar to that of well-known risk factors like obesity, or prolonged smoking.

Amy is a keen gardener and with friends, worked on a community garden close to her home. To be cut off from her friends and garden, puts her recovery at risk. Advocare have 120 people volunteering through our Community Visitors Scheme, connecting volunteers with older people who are socially isolated with the aim of improving their quality of life through companionship. We are currently matching Amy with a volunteer who can visit her in the rehab centre, and hopefully support with the transition to a residential aged care facility, a significant move, especially without family able to be part of the transition on the ground. Having a consistent person by Amy's side could help make the move more manageable, and offer some of the holistic support not always evident in acute (hospital) and primary (rehab) care.

Understanding and navigating Australia's aged care system is incredibly complex and I have weekly calls from peers: capable professionals, at a loss to know how to best support their ageing parents and in-laws. Most families are under prepared for the reality of a steep decline, like when someone breaks a hip. The situation is often compounded when people are under emotional stress. My advice? Face reality. We are all going to (hopefully) live to a ripe old age. Get your will in order, agree on who will be your enduring and power of attorney and guardianship and have conversations about your end of life thoughts and preferences (even if it may be decades away).

If you're concerned about aged care services you are receiving, you can call Advocare on 1800 655 566 or to volunteer call (08) 9479 7566.

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