

Media Release

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Palliative care – living and dying well

“Palliative care isn’t here to help you die – it’s here to help you live your best life possible.”

Liz Tantau is still grieving the loss of her beloved husband of 20 years, Ian, but she’s determined to help people understand the importance and significance of the end-of-life journey.

May 21 to 27 is National Palliative Care Week, aimed to increase understanding of the many benefits of palliative care.

After months of palliative care at home, Ian spent the last four weeks of his life at [O’Neill House](#), a specialised end-of-life comfort care centre in Prahran, Melbourne, before he died on 17 November 2022.

The [award-winning](#) O’Neill House, run by Catholic, for-purpose aged and disability organisation VMCH, offers a modern, luxurious, and homelike environment for up to 22 people entering the last phase of their life, and their families.

Liz describes O’Neill House as a “beautiful place” where she and Ian’s family were welcomed and supported with “open arms”. Family and friends were free to visit at any time and immediate family were able to stay overnight with Ian in his room. In addition, an onsite apartment ensured someone was with Ian constantly in his final days, which the family incredibly comforting.

“It was horrible when we took Ian from home with the knowledge that he probably wasn’t coming back. I promised Ian we wouldn’t leave him, and thankfully O’Neill House was a place where I felt I could honour the promise I made,” Liz says.

“The building itself was also beautiful, with sunny outdoor spaces, a lovely dining area and several lounges, as well as a very peaceful chapel. It was a really calm and gentle environment to be in while you’re going through a really traumatic experience.”

This year’s theme for National Palliative Care Week is ‘Matters of Life and Death’, and highlights the people at the heart of quality palliative care.

Liz says all staff at O’Neill House made their family’s time there one of ease, giving those Ian loved support to both celebrate the retired pharmacist’s life, as well as say goodbye.

“The high level of care was incredibly comforting. The staff were all beautiful to him and although Ian couldn’t speak, you could see in his eyes that he was relaxed and secure in their care.

“After Ian passed something that will stay with me forever is the send off he was given by the staff. Their compassion and care was obvious as they formed a guard of honour and serenaded him with ‘Amazing Grace’ as he was carried from the home – it was beautiful.”

VMCH CEO Sonya Smart says experiences like Liz and Ian’s are exactly the reason why VMCH chose to embark on this specific service offering.

“We know around one in four Victorians who die each year do so without adequate access to palliative care, so we’ve been privileged to support more than 100 people and their families in their end-of-life journey at O’Neill House. We’re also focused on advocating for palliative care planning to help ensure people’s last experiences of life are ones of comfort, dignity and choice.”

Liz agrees, explaining that Ian’s decision to communicate his wishes made the journey easier to navigate.

“Along with the reassurance that we were honouring Ian’s care wishes, I really appreciated O’Neill House staff who always included the family in developing the evolving care plans, and helped everyone to come to terms with the fact that we weren’t trying to extend Ian’s life, but rather make him comfortable and give him a good quality of life at the end,” Liz says.

“I’d encourage people to have a (palliative) plan in place sooner rather than later. To be aware of what people’s wishes are is really important, for them and their families.”

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About VMCH

Here at VMCH, our services are as diverse as the people we support.

Our values underpin the work we do. As a Catholic, for-purpose organisation, compassion, respect and inclusion aren’t just words to us, they guide us in everything we do.

While we’ve been around for over a century, we’re always moving forward. Always staying true to who we are by supporting people and families to live their best lives; providing a place to call home and spaces to learn and grow.

Our professional and compassionate teams are with you on your life journey; helping you with a wide range of support from early learning and therapy, specialist education, disability services, affordable homes, residential aged care, retirement living and at-home aged care.

