

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

Faculty of Sciences, Department of Nursing & Midwifery

**The experiences of socially isolated older people as they access and
navigate the health system**

A Dissertation submitted by

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences and challenges of socially isolated older people in navigating and accessing the health care system. Understanding the specific issues confronting these individuals will inform the development of more appropriate models of community-based aged care. An extensive literature review identified many areas of research into social isolation of the older person, but minimal research was located that dealt specifically with how this cohort accesses and navigates the health care system.

Key words: social isolation, older person, aged, access health/medical services, aged care

Objective: This research reports findings from a study that explored the challenges experienced by socially isolated and unwell older people as they attempted to access the health care system.

Design: A longitudinal qualitative, interpretive study using a constructivist grounded theory approach with in-depth interviewing.

Setting: This study was conducted in metropolitan Brisbane, with frail elderly people who were accessed via their General Practitioner (GP) service.

Participants: Six participants who met pre-determined selection criteria were invited to participate in this longitudinal study and interviewed three times over an eighteen-month period.

Findings: Fear emerged as a common experience embracing aspects of daily life such as depletion of social networks, being dependent on others, loss of mobility and diminishing ability to drive. Inadequate or unreliable public transport resulted in extended waiting

times to attend medical appointments. Disillusionment and anger were responses to ageist attitudes that engendered feelings of invisibility and powerlessness.

Conclusions: Through efforts to address the specific issues of older people living independently, this study highlights the suffering experienced by those who are socially isolated and lack the knowledge, skills, physical wellbeing and support to locate and access relevant health services.

CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

Signature of Candidate Date

ENDORSEMENT

Signature of Supervisor/s Date

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Nurses are often in a unique position to be closely involved with their patients, which enables them to see through the façade of some people's lives. These closer professional relationships often lend themselves to identification of issues beyond the realm of physical illness commonly encountered in general practice. This research evolved out of such interactions and would not have been possible without Fay, Win, Bette, Ken, Monica and Shirley. Heartfelt thanks to all of you for your willingness to be a part of this project and most importantly for allowing me into the most personal aspects of your lives. I have been humbled by your continuing determination and courage and hope that this research, and the two published journal articles arising from it, are worthy of your trust in me to accurately portray your experiences.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACAT	Aged Care Assessment Team
GP	General Practitioner
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
MACOP	Ministerial Advisory Council for Older Persons
NSW	New South Wales
QDA	qualitative data analysis
RBWH	Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital
RSL	Returned Services League
SIU	Seniors Interests Unit
USQ	University of Southern Queensland