We want to live and die with dignity

By KERRY FAULKNER

Neil Durston (90) has to cope not only with the fact his wife is dying but also that her last days will be spent in a home that is crowded and understaffed.

The City Beach resident and his friend John Dingle, National Seniors Australia Perth zone manager, are speaking out to get a better deal for seniors in the wake of the federal government’s Productivity Commission Report on Aged Care Reform – Caring for Older Australians.

Mr Durston and Mr Dingle said they wanted older Australians to be able to live their last days and die with dignity but were battling bureaucracy, their powerlessness as aged people and the fact Australians preferred to ignore issues of ageing because it meant confronting their mortality.

But they have the backing of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) which says reform is urgently needed.

RACP president Professor John Kolbe said the health and aged-care system was ill-equipped to cope with the increasing demands of an ageing population.

He said almost all Australians aged over 65 had at least one chronic condition, and 80% required complex care for dementia, diabetes and other illnesses associated with old age.

“Older people, particularly those living in residential care facilities, often have difficulties accessing timely specialist medical care, resulting in unnecessary hospitalisation,” Mr Kolbe said.

The RACP is backing calls by consumer advocates who say the government’s Productivity Commission Report on Aged Care Reform is vital.

Aged-care providers and advocates want to see the sale of the family home as a penalty, rather than as an option.

“A home that is crowded and understaffed has the remains of it exceeding the value of the house,” Mr Kolbe said.

He estimated that by 2050, over 3.5 million older Australians would access aged-care services annually and more people would access aged-care services because it meant confronting their mortality.

But perhaps the biggest issue is the fact Australians prefer to ignore issues of ageing, he said.

“They are not being built and they are not being built at a rate that is sufficient to meet the needs of an Australia that is living longer,” he said.

“I think it’s time Australians looked in the mirror and took a hard look at what we’re going to face in the middle of the 21st Century,“ he said.

Many home owners perceived the sale of the home as a penalty, and argued that they had made other contributions that entitled them to access their aged care when required.

The government has responded and said it would be the start of a new aged-care system based on care entitlements and choice.

The option was a reverse mortgage, where a financial institution lends money on the value of a home but with no repayments.

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He said elderly people were forced to move long distances from their spouses and communities to find “There’s an excess of quotas in WA but they are not being built and staff very poorly paid – they say nurses in aged care get about one third of what other nurses get,” he said.

Mr Durston backs moves for better pay for aged-care workers and setting up a one-stop “gateway” – a single source for people to find out about accommodation.