

Ageism in the time of COVID-19

EveryAGE Counts Position Statement

In the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen the surfacing of some deep-seated ageist attitudes toward older people on a number of fronts that need to be acknowledged and addressed.

The heightened susceptibility of older people to the virus and specific advice that they self-isolate is sometimes seeing older people blamed for the community-wide restrictions. The highlighting of age in the reporting on deaths from the virus reinforces an underlying view that younger people are not really at risk and the 'problem' is therefore less serious. Language used by the media and spokespeople describing a cohort of people spanning up to four decades of life as 'the elderly', entrenches a stereotype that all older people are more or less the same as each other.

In other commentary, older people are being called on to take a disproportionate impact of the economic fallout of the pandemic. At its worst, we are seeing discussions about the possibility of age-based rationing of limited healthcare treatments.

Too often, there is the implication that older people's lives are more expendable than other members of the community, their contributions less valuable, their deaths less tragic.

As a coalition campaigning for a world without ageism, where all people are valued, respected or connected regardless of age or functional ability, EveryAGE Counts asserts:

- Every life is equal and every human deserves respect and equal access to the right care.
- Policy responses around behaviours to avoid catching and spreading coronavirus should apply to everyone, irrespective of age.
- In any 'rationing of care' scenario, individualised assessment of a person's comorbidities, frailty, strength of immune system and capacity to benefit from treatments are the only acceptable inputs a medical decision maker should consider and age alone should never be relied upon.
- Language is important and spokespeople should avoid using 'the elderly' as a shorthand that lumps together age cohorts spanning three or four decades of life. Talk about 'older people' having a weakened immune system and a greater likelihood of other health conditions, making them susceptible to more severe health impacts, should they contract the virus.
- We must work together, directed and motivated by evidence - regardless of our age, gender, cultural background, ability or health status - to manage the pandemic, make the best decisions and keep all of us safe.
- When we see negative messages emerging about older people – or about younger people - it's our opportunity to stand up against ageism and for a caring and compassionate society upholding human rights of all.
- Now more than ever, the generations need to work together. As we emerge from the pandemic, we need all generations to pull together to 'build back better' to ensure that all Australians benefit from the post-COVID recovery.