

Delivered at CHC Older People's Strategy day – 6rg Dec 2013

Good morning everyone.

My name is Phyllis Preece and I am chair of National Pensioner Convention Wales.

The National Pensioner Convention's main objective is to promote the welfare and interest of all pensioners, as a way of securing dignity, respect and financial security in retirement.

We're the only national campaign group in the country which is run by pensioners for pensioners and that is why NPC are campaigning for Dignity. It's something we care passionately about and it means something to all of us.

It is for these reasons I'm delighted to be here today, as an older person, to speak to you about how we can take action on dignity.

And let's be very very clear and honest about that ... this is what we're here to do today, to take action.

Dignity is not just an added extra – something we'd like to be treated with if you have the time or the energy.

Dignity is not a tick box exercise, you can't "do dignity" for 5 minutes and then go about your day job, dignity has to be at the heart of everything we try and do to support and care for older people.

Dignity means something different to all of us, and that's because our dignity is unique. Dignity is about seeing the person. Really seeing the person you are supporting or caring for, listening to them and supporting them in the way most appropriate to them.

I'm sure everyone here today realises dignity is important – otherwise, why else would you be here? How many of us can actually explain clearly, in practical terms, what we actually mean ...

What can we, on a very practical level, do about dignity?

Well, you're lucky I'm here!

The NPC has created our Dignity Code.

The code, which you have in your delegate packs, is a simple, single side of A4 which lists unacceptable actions and recommends good practice.

The Dignity Code was first debated and passed at the NPC's Conference in March 2011. Its formal launch then took place in the House of Commons in February 2012. The launch made the front page in the Daily Telegraph, along with a public letter signed by many prominent signatories.

Since then we have been securing further support, and have recently written to every local authority in the UK, and are continuing to gather as much support as possible.

This code is written in a language everyone understands. It gives practical examples of what we mean when we talk about dignity. And its designed to be used by everyone – front line staff, commissioners, policy – makers, carers and older people. Dignity is everyone's responsibility, and this code is for all of us.

I'll be talking about elements of the code in terms of my own experiences, my friends and my family. I'll be sharing with you examples of where this code, were it adopted, would have made a real difference. It would have made their experiences happier, more comfortable and more dignified.

The Dignity Code recognises that certain practices and actions are unacceptable to older people. For instance, one of the examples we give is:

“Not informing older people of what is happening in a way that they can understand”

Dignity isn't rocket science, you don't need to have a professional qualification to understand what dignity is, and you don't need to be Einstein to realise when you're not being treated with dignity. Speaking to people in simple terms, language that everyone can understand is an important part of making people feel valued.

Does the person on the street know what you mean by “person – centred care” – do you even really know what you mean by that? The person on the street does understand what you mean by “Let’s talk about what’s important to you and how we can make sure that’s what happens” Dignity isn’t a theory, its real and it matters to people – and we can start making it real by talking with not to people.

I’ll give you a personal example. My GP – I’ve known him for years – he knows me and my family, and I trust him. I trust him because he asks me what I think, he listens to how I’m feeling and he explains things to me so that I can understand. He starts off every visit asking me how I am and I can tell him – he listens. And when it comes to him explaining what treatment I might need or what he’s going to do next – I understand, he asks if I’ve got any questions and he gives me the time to ask them. It’s not rocket science, like I said, but it matters.

Another example of practices that are unacceptable to older people form the dignity code.

“Refusing treatment on the grounds of age”

Dignity doesn’t stand on its own – you can’t “do dignity” without doing the whole lot. You need to see a person as a person – not as a number or an age – not as a series of needs – not as a cost or a burden – and certainly not as “low, moderate, substantial, critical” – because to the person its happening to, it’s always Critical.

Delivering Dignity is part of the battle against age discrimination, and it’s really important that we all remember that.

12 years ago my mother in law was ill in hospital, she was having difficulty swallowing and it was taking longer and longer to feed her. We were asked, plain as day, was it ok if they stopped ... feeding her that is.

No. It wasn’t ok. Would they have asked that question if it had been a younger person? Would they have asked that question if she didn’t have grey hair and wrinkled skin? 12 years ago isn’t that long ago ... there have been recent sorties in the media about older people’s files being marked as Do Not Resuscitate in hospital, without them ever being asked! It’s still happening and it’s happening in Wales.

One of the things the Dignity Code calls strongly for is:

“Support for the individual to maintain their hygiene and personal appearance”

Now I don't know about you lot, but I thought about what I was going to wear when I got ready this morning – I washed my face, brushed my teeth, chose my clothes and made myself tidy. I've always lived like this and I'm sure you have too.

My auntie was in a care home, she lived there for many years. When we used to go and visit her, we'd find her not in her own clothes. This was a proud lady who'd been smartly dressed and respectable all her life – to see her sat in other peoples clothes, unable to do anything about it herself – was just awful.

How would you like it if you were put in someone else's clothes? Or your hair wasn't washed and done the way you like it before you came today? Would you feel like yourself? Would you be happy and comfortable and confident?

The one message I want you to take home today when you think about dignity is that is common sense – think about how you would feel being on the receiving end of a treatment or service that didn't value you as a person – that you didn't play a part in – that didn't let you have your say.

You wouldn't much like it would you? it's not good enough, is it?

To end, I'd like you to all take a moment and think about a person or situation in your own lives, whether it was a friend or family member or someone else, who wasn't treated with the dignity or respect they deserved. Take a moment to think on that. Think about how you felt. Think about how they felt.

All I'm asking is what you harness that feeling, and use it for good.

Use it to make sure that you do make a difference, in whatever way you can, to making sure older people are treated with the dignity and respect we all deserve. Take this code – pin it on the wall – talk about it with your colleagues – bring it to life – and make a real difference to dignity for older people.