

Media Release

Embargoed until Midnight Saturday March 1, 2003

Eat with friends – it's good for you

A disturbingly high percentage of elderly Australians who live alone may be at risk of malnutrition. Recent studies indicate that elderly Tasmanians living on their own face a 70% risk of malnutrition. This is more than double the risk faced by their mainland counterparts.

Elderly people that live alone tend to eat alone and recent studies have found a strong link between social isolation and poor health. Eating alone starts a downward spiral of reduced appetite and inadequate nutrition that leads to ill-health and an increased dependence on health and community services.

The Tasmanian 'eating with friends' program aims to stop this downward spiral by offering elderly people the chance to dine in a communal setting. Ms Jackie Dermody, coordinator of the Moonah eating with friends group says the program fulfils a vital social function in Tasmanian aged care.

"The meals on wheels program addresses the issue of poor nutrition amongst the elderly, but 77% of meal recipients eat alone," said Ms Dermody. "We have anything from 12 to 110 elderly people participating in our eating with friends meals and over 400 elderly people regularly benefit from the program," she said.

Eating with friends is a community-driven program that involves neighbourhood houses, local residents, volunteers, church groups, ethnic communities and schools working in partnership with government agencies.

Participants enjoy the social aspect of eating with friends and actively praise the work of the groups and their volunteers. As one participant said, "it gives you something to talk about with families and friends".

Ms Jackie Dermody will discuss the program in greater detail at the 7th National Rural Health Conference, which will be held at the Grand Chancellor Hotel in Hobart from March 1-4. Her presentation will be delivered at 12:05pm on Sunday March 2, 2003 in the Ballroom Centre at the Grand Chancellor Hotel, Hobart.

-ends-