March 21, 2013

Check on your elderly neighbours to ensure their well-being

As part of Senior’s Week 2013 (March 17-24), NSW Ambulance is encouraging people to check on their elderly neighbours, to ensure their welfare.

In the past 12 months, paramedics attended 77 cases of seniors aged 65 years and over whose deaths were classified as “non-recent”.

Often the deaths had occurred just hours earlier, with many patients being found after having died in their sleep. However, there were frequent cases of people being discovered after days and even weeks following their passing.

In two cases - an elderly man at Padstow Heights and another at Queanbeyan – the seniors had not been seen for two weeks prior to the discovery of their bodies.

NSW Ambulance Duty Operations Manager, Inspector Norm Spalding, said many seniors lived alone and this was unfortunately an age when people were at their most vulnerable.

Insp Spalding said that falls were of concern, particularly in the 81 to 90 years age group.

“The potential for falls means a senior might be incapacitated and unable to reach a telephone to call for assistance,” Insp Spalding said.

“Having a vigilant neighbour who keeps an eye on whether the front door has remained open over night, the lights have not been switched on in the evening or the TV has not been switched off, could mean the difference between an elderly person receiving emergency assistance or having them suffer for an extended period of time.

“Often, there is a perfectly good reason, but it is better to be sure.”

Insp Spalding said that forming a routine of either telephoning the senior neighbour or family member, or making a friendly visit was also something to be encouraged.

Also of concern to paramedics was the number of call-outs to seniors who had accidentally overdosed on, or taken the wrong, medication.

An analysis of responses so far this year (January 1 to March 17) showed 47 call-outs to seniors across NSW who required assistance in this regard.

Reasons included patients taking a double dose of medication, taking the wrong medication, and taking medication that belonged to someone else.

In several cases, the patient was suffering from dementia and was confused about their medication.

Insp Spalding advised that, to overcome such problems, the patient or caretaker divide their daily medication into webster packs to minimise confusion, and dispose of old/unused medications.

Seniors were also advised to never take medication prescribed for another person, even if their symptoms appeared the same. “Such medications may impact adversely on existing health conditions, or may be contra-indicative to medications already prescribed,” Inspector Spalding said.

A number of patients had also mistaken disinfectant and floor cleaner for such fluids as mouthwash and cordial.

“People are strongly reminded to store cleaning fluids and other toxic fluids separately from products which might be ingested,” Inspector Spalding said.

Save Triple Zero (000) for saving lives

Ambulance Service of New South Wales
Media Unit
Email: media@ambulance.nsw.gov.au
Tel: 02 9320 7796
Web: www.ambulance.nsw.gov.au
Fax: 02 9320 7804