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THE FINE ART OF DYING

As a physio, Margaret Ambridge helps people through the last stages of life. As an artist she tries, through her charcoal drawings, to demystify the end of that journey

WORDS MICHAEL MCGUIRE MAIN PICTURE MATT TURNER

Margaret Ambridge wasn't sure she wanted to work in palliative care. She wasn't sure she wanted to be surrounded by the sick and the dying; people whose lifespan could often be measured in days and weeks.

Ambridge is a physiotherapist. She was an industrial physio at Holden for many years and also worked in sport. But when an opening came up in the palliative care ward at Modbury Hospital in the city's northeast, she wasn't sure.

"I initially was scared of my own reaction to seeing people in acute pain or feeling helpless," she says.

Part of her hesitation was the experience of watching her mother die from breast cancer and the fear that working among the dying would bring back painful memories.

But Ambridge wasn't only a physio, she was also an artist.

After the death of her mother, who was also an artist, Ambridge gave art away for a few years before her work in the palliative care ward inspired her to take it up again.

The culmination of that work will be on display at an exhibition at the Kerry Packer Civic Gallery at the University of South Australia from September 4 as part of the Australian Palliative Care Conference being held in Adelaide from September 6-8.

"My art is my way of working through what I see and what I feel, and that helps me," she says.

It was one patient in particular that persuaded Ambridge to return to art. An old

woman was in the ward. On the first day she was surrounded by family and friends, beautifully dressed, made up. There were lots of flowers in her room.

"It looked like a florist shop," she says.

When Ambridge went to give the lady a physio session "she whispered in my ear 'can you get rid of all these people?'"

She also found a bunch of roses that had fallen to the floor and gone unnoticed under the bed. They hadn't been watered and had shrivelled away. "I asked if it was okay to take them home and draw them," she says. The lady said it was.

"When I went back a couple of days later, she was dying, and all of the friends had left. All her make-up was off. Everything she had presented two days beforehand had gone and all that was left was the flowers. It was so sad."

So Ambridge drew that bunch of roses she found on the floor.

"I started looking at the flowers in the hospice and started thinking they are a metaphor for what is happening here," she says. "These flowers, sometimes they age quicker than the people in the room, and they get replaced, or sometimes the people die and we are left with the flowers."

Ambridge also thought her art was a way to allow people to confront a segment of life that many find uncomfortable or frightening.

And while Ambridge's earlier career in art had focused on making prints, she decided drawing was the best way to reflect life and death in the palliative care ward.

The drawings are also done in charcoal. The black and white tones, Ambridge believes, are more emotional and more powerful.

"If the imagery is about something that is a very strong topic, I think sometimes colour



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can be distracting,” she says. “Colour is our natural world, which we see all the time, whereas black and white does pare it down.”

Ambridge doesn't draw portraits of the people in the ward. Sometimes, she records what has been left behind such as the flowers, or even an impression on a pillow. Or events. There was a wedding and Ambridge drew the veil the terminally ill bride wore. She has drawn children, using her own kids as models, and says the hardest part of her job as a physio is seeing kids at the end of a bed which contains their dying parent.

Ambridge has also made a video to try to better explain the world of palliative care. She has interviewed colleagues – nurses, doctors, consultants, cleaners – about life working with those at the end of their allotted time, about the people who “have got under their guard and affected them”.

“You do have to be professional and put up this wall, but you can't help but be affected by this stuff,” she says. “You can't help, but every now and again there will be some person who triggers something in you or you align with in some way.”

Ambridge may be biased but she believes there is a difference when you walk into her ward, as opposed to a general medical ward. She says there are not too many branches of the medical profession where you will see a highly paid consultant bending down to tie the shoelace of a patient.

“They are a very special group of people and the unit is actually a wonderful place to work because you are surrounded by people who feel the same way as you, who are touched by humanity and want to help and make a difference. To me that is very important.”

Through the video and her drawings, Ambridge hopes to demonstrate to the public that the end of life need not be the sad, terrifying landscape that many imagine it to be.

“It's not as scary a world as they think, the palliative care world,” she says.

“It's not just about waiting to die. We do an incredible range of things in the ward to make the most of the time people have left, to make



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it as comfortable and achieve what they want to achieve.”

Ambridge will continue working in palliative care as long as those feelings remain. She believes that if any of the workers in the ward were no longer affected by the day-to-day human emotion they see in front of them, then it would be time to quit.

But until then she will continue to help those who are in the last stages of their life.

“It’s the most rewarding work I have done,” she says. “I spent years in sport and industrial (physio) but this is a very special little window into people’s lives, and you just feel very lucky to be part of that and have that journey with them.” ●

'til Death, Kerry Packer Civic Gallery, The Hawke Centre, University of SA, 50-55 North Tce, city, September 4-13, unisa.edu.au



Artist and physiotherapist Margaret Ambridge, main picture, wants to demonstrate to the public that the end of life need not be the sad, terrifying landscape that many imagine it to be; her charcoal on paper drawing entitled *'til death*, which is also the name of her exhibition, top, and *Goodnight*, charcoal and Indian ink on film, above



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