

MEDIA RELEASE

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2024 Plunkett Lecture: The state of mind killing the will to live in patients, carers and clinicians

Psychiatrist and palliative care researcher Dr David Kissane will explain his groundbreaking research on a major contributor leading to a desire to die when he delivers the 2024 annual Plunkett Lecture.

Dr Kissane, chair of Palliative Care Research at the University of Notre Dame Australia, is a leading expert in demoralisation, a contagious but highly treatable state of low morale that limits a person's ability to cope.

A common state of mind, Dr Kissane's studies have found demoralisation to be characterised by feeling trapped in a highly stressful event, such as cancer diagnoses or other serious medical illness.

Across 25 years of research and clinical studies, Dr Kissane has established a link between demoralisation and the wish to die. Through numerous studies, he has found patients who are demoralised reported higher levels of hopelessness, pointlessness, and isolation – which could lead to suicidal thoughts.

Between one quarter to a third of patients with serious illness suffer the burden and distress of this mental state, causing a number to want to give up prematurely on life.

“We did studies showing that demoralisation was a more powerful mediator of suicide than depression, in fact about 3 times more powerful, and in 2022, a systematic review confirmed this reality across 18 studies,” Dr Kissane said.

In this free Plunkett Lecture on 20 November, Dr Kissane will demonstrate his widely used Demoralisation Scale and numerous studies to determine not only how demoralisation can be clinically diagnosed but also treated.

For Dr Kissane, the medical contribution of demoralisation raises both opportunities and challenges for palliative care, but the most important factor is supporting a person's meaning and purpose of life.

“Promoting hope, courage, meaning and purpose in life is central to human flourishing and fulfilment. This is how we overcome demoralization,” Dr Kissane said.

“So, if palliative care is to improve its delivery, it needs to build clinical skills among staff to counter psycho-existential distress.”

Hosted by the Plunkett Centre for Ethics – a joint initiative of Australian Catholic University, St Vincent's Public Hospital Sydney, St Vincent's Private Hospital Sydney, the Mater Hospital Sydney, Calvary Healthcare Limited, Mercy Hospital in Melbourne and Cabrini Hospital in Melbourne – the annual lecture series invites world leaders to address the state of Australian healthcare ethics.

The Centre’s director, Associate Professor Xavier Symons, said Dr Kissane’s fascinating research should resonate with all Australians.

“As voluntary assisted dying becomes more widely accessible across Australia, Dr Kissane’s research provides much needed rigorous scientific context to address end-of-life care,” Associate Professor Symons said.

“His data not only shows a correlation between people who believe there is no point to continue living and the desire to die, but presents enormous opportunities for improving patient care in palliative care settings.

“The Plunkett Centre is honoured to welcome Dr Kissane for what promises to be an important discussion on end-of-life care.”

Dr David Kissane is available for interview.

Details of the 2024 Plunkett Lecture:

When: Wednesday 20 November 2024 from 5.15pm

Where:

Function Room,
L4 St Vincent’s Clinic
390 Victoria Street
Darlinghurst

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