

# Taking care of our Eskimos

If you don't want to be reminded of your own mortality, look away to something else, the sports section, perhaps.

Because this column is about death.

As a young person, I never understood the tendency for scholars, philosophers and other unknowable people to contemplate the meaning of life and inevitably its end, especially their own.

Now mine approaches, I understand. Of course.

And I've been reminded by a couple of things lately, one fleeting, the other something of a constant.

The first was David Attenborough saying the only animal he knows of that deliberately hunts and kills humans is the polar bear.

That reminded me of childhood tales of Eskimos and their legendary custom of "encouraging" old people past their use-by date to sit out on the ice to meet their maker.

And in one of those moments when your mind does odd things, I imagined polar bears acquired a taste for us from all those decrepit Eskimos waiting to die.

Presumably, they don't have to do it now because we live in more humane times.

Which brings me to the second reason I've been somewhat absorbed in the fragility of life lately - I'm writing a book about Hospice Taranaki to commemorate its 25th anniversary next year.

The point I want to make is that no matter what stage of our lives we've reached, there are frequent reminders of the fact they will one day end.

I'm not referring to the news, whose preoccupation with disaster is undiminished, and may even be expanding as newsroom logistics focus on events that are easily reported through the ubiquity of cellphone cameras.

No, I'm talking about the death of family members, as inescapable a phenomenon as the ticking of time.

In a place as cohesive as Taranaki, there has grown an inevitability in the last quarter century that at some point you're likely to find out about hospice in a way that's possibly life-changing.

After spending weeks talking to hospice-related people and reading the news clippings and reports that chronicle their remarkable history, I'm beginning to understand why this particular organisation has such a reverent place in Taranaki consciousness.

Most of us have had a relative cared for by the hospice team, so when we're approached for support we're only too happy to give.

And we need to. Because one of the interesting things emerging from my research is that ever since the hospice movement began in New Zealand in the late 1970s, governments of the day, of whatever hue, have balked at paying for it.

Every single year of a hospice's existence is a struggle to make ends meet, because end-of-life care demands a great deal of time, devotion and love, and bulk-funded health systems squirm beyond belief at the prospect of shelling out for something their political manipulators see as simply too expensive.

It's never put in so many words, of course, but the health system has its limits when it comes to seeing off our old Eskimos in a way that modern civilisation expects.

Over the history of our wonderful hospice, it has thrived only because of skilled management by some of the best minds this province has been lucky enough to engender.

At times, the government's contribution to the cost has dropped as low as 55 percent, leaving the shortfall to be met by the charitable goodwill of our good selves.

No government has ever consistently met the promise of 70 percent that has so often been made, most likely at election times.

And this question - why only 70 percent?

What justification has there ever been for that niggardly number? It appears to be an historical calculation, embedded forever in the 80s and 90s when the country's 35-plus hospices first pitched for recognition of what was then the newish specialty of palliative care.

As the aged population swells, it's not a ratio likely to change soon.

If you're into irony, picture former Ministers of Health admitted to the care of their local hospice: "Hey guys, I was all for making it 100 percent..."

And so, kindly keep on being kind, folks, when the hospice make its appeals to you, most likely through its army of volunteers, whose own personal contributions have been awesome over those 25 years.

I feel enormously privileged to be writing about all this. It has put me in touch with the very heart of Taranaki. It's a very big heart.