

## Society needs better tributes to the dead

A daily indicator of mortality is the list at the back of the paper telling us who's died. I've avoided reading it until recently, which speaks volumes about my state of mind concerning life's ever-diminishing span.

My span, I mean. Spans generally have increased since medical science got on top of a lot of killers, although the overuse of antibiotics threatens to slow the gains. My span is into its last quarter, I suspect, although I prefer to think "second half". If I'm honest, the fraction is probably a lot smaller.

We can't be sure, of course, and many of us would have been heartened by news that one of the country's oldest people reached the age of 111. If I match her longevity, I still have a third of my span to go.

But this is getting morbid. The real purpose here is to bring up the matter of death notices. They haven't changed much since daily newspapers first appeared in New Zealand in the 1860s, and may be a last feature of the print press not revamped to meet pressure for change.

They are ridiculously formal, relics of our colonial past that read like shipping announcements and the speeches of long-gone prime ministers. Apart from signalling the obvious to immediate members of the deceased's family, they're worse than useless at informing the rest of us about who the dearly departed actually were and what they were known for.

We're all known for something. Innate Kiwi modesty afflicts most of us, but we all have a story to tell, and every story is interesting. I know this from writing books about people. Inevitably, the first interview begins with the subject declaring: "I don't know what you'll find to write about." And then we go on to recollect a fascinating tale of triumphs, tribulations, humour and hardship.

None of that is hinted at in the barren death notice. Admittedly, that's not its purpose, but perhaps it's time to make a change, to expand the palette and start to include details that properly record the highlights of each person's existence and alert those who didn't know about the deceased's contributions.

What is a community if not a vast collection of contributions from each of its members, some negative but most positive. We hear about those if the subject was prominent in politics, business, sport or the arts, but even those arenas are scarcely touched by that companion to the death notice, the obituary.

The appearance of obits is a hit and miss affair, and often depends on whether advocates for the dead have sufficient energy to interest the media in making the effort. A few people are obited, but many who deserve it are not. I have never been able to discern much of a pattern.

Most reporters dislike having to do them, probably because reporters tend to be young, and the thought of recording stories closely resembling parental reminiscences is off-putting to some. Present day news is more appealing.

Obits can be tricky. Was it Mark Twain who said a report of his death was exaggerated? When the Times prematurely reported the demise of the Nawab of Pataudi, its helpless response next day appeared under the headline "Nawab of Pataudi better". In those instances, newspapers were caught out by a once-routine procedure to have obits pre-written and ready to appear the moment someone famous carked it. That's why a newspaper library used to be called "the morgue".

JT column for June 30, 2018 – death notices

Local obits still appear occasionally, but not nearly often enough. Presumably, that was why we saw something unusual on the “family” page recently – an expanded death notice in the form of the life story of Ngaire Smith.

She helped found rape crisis and counselling services in Taranaki, as well as a women’s studies programme at the local polytech. She spoke to many groups about sexual abuse, and in 1991 was awarded a Soroptimist International Woman of Spirit Award.

Not everyone makes such a significant contribution to society, but most people gather interesting stories around their lives. It’s time the funeral service companies – who after all charge an arm and a leg to dispose of us – designed a better public record.

It’s not as if the information is hard to obtain, since most funeral services involve one or more eulogies. As ancestry researchers will tell you, the compilation of family histories would be greatly aided by something more informative than the current sparse notice.