

# Dining with Death:

## Conversation menus as a means of educating people about death, dying and bereavement



Rebecca M Patterson, Policy and Communications Manager and Mark A Hazelwood, Chief Executive, Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care



### Background

There is growing consensus that palliative care should encompass a 'health promoting' approach so that people are aware of ways to live and support each other with death, dying and bereavement. 'A key element of such a health promoting approach is encouraging openness about death in society.

However, finding ways to educate wider society in issues relating to death and dying can be problematic in a culture where raising these issues is variously perceived as too morbid, too difficult or too sensitive to mention.

The *Dining with Death* conversation menu is designed to act as an ice-breaker to give people inspiration and permission to talk about what is often perceived as a taboo subject.

The conversation menu was produced as part of the work of *Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief*, an alliance initiated by the Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care and working towards making Scotland a place where people can be open about death, dying and bereavement



### What do people say about it?

"I have used it with teaching sessions and the initial reaction is usually confusion but once they open the menu and start to read they smile (snigger) and this gives an opening to discuss things (quicker than I would have thought) that they probably wouldn't have considered discussing or even thought about." Nurse Consultant in Cancer & Palliative Care

"I realised how much I love life, what I love about it and what I need to do to make it more vivid for now." Participant at *Tea, Cake or Death?*

"Amazing! Please keep going!" Participant at *Tea, Cake or Death?*

### Where has the dining with death conversation menu been used?

The menu was first used November 2011, at Howie's Restaurant, Edinburgh to mark the launch of *Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief*. Since then, around 800 hard copies of the menu have been distributed and the menu has been downloaded from the website 2470 times.

Known occasions where the menu has been used include:

- staff teaching sessions across NHS Lothian
- NHS Education Scotland education session on palliative care/ethics
- Mental Health and Wellbeing in Later Life conference hosted by NHS Health Scotland, in partnership with Age Scotland and the Mental Health Foundation.
- two *tea, cake, or death?* events at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.
- a series of monthly death cafes in Edinburgh organised by *Just Festival*.

### Discussion

Responses to these events indicate the menu has potential as a learning tool: it can be used flexibly, across different types of events and different audiences; it overcomes barriers to engagement in death discussions by intriguing participants and engaging them in non-threatening conversations through which they can learn from their own and others' experience. The menu is cheap to produce and portable. Questions on the menu can be tailored to the interests of a particular audience. There is potential for further evaluation and development of the *Dining with Death* menu in the future.