



Preparing the Way

“Death is simply one of the chapters of life.” Helen Callanan

An interview with Maggie Hamilton

Preparing the Way, ground-breaking professional training for end of life doulas, was founded by Victoria-based Helen Callanan in 2014. Fast forward several years and over 1,000 individuals across Australia and New Zealand have attended *Preparing the Way* courses.

Helen’s involvement in end of life training and support began organically. After a background in complementary medicines, including a degree in Traditional Chinese Medicine, Helen found herself taking care of her dying father, and was also a fulltime carer for her mother, who lived with dementia for several years.

Alongside this, she’d been working with other people and families. ‘I’d be in hospital with a family during

their vigil with a family member or friend or assisting others hire a hospital bed so their friend or family member could die at home,’ she reflects. ‘I was so drawn to working in this place of transition, and I was comfortable in this space.’

‘Sadly [for many], we outsourced death around a hundred years ago, which helped create a culture of death and dying being ‘taboo’. In reality, we gave away, or lost our competence and confidence in, caring for our people who are advancing in age, for our dying and our deceased.’



The emphasis shifted to prolonging life at all costs and ending up in hospital fearful of death. As a result, our culture tends to live like it is life versus death, rather than seeing death as simply one of life’s chapters.’

‘Fear of death stops us from living a fulfilling life. When we start to see death as simply a chapter, our perspective shifts. We focus on the circle of life. We gain hope. We see that until we have exhaled our last breath, we are alive! That allows for wonderful and memorable moments even in our last chapter.’

Doula is an ancient word of Greek origin, meaning one who serves. ‘Our end of life doulas help demystify death, and have a non-

clinical role, providing mental, physical, emotional and spiritual support to those nearing the end of their lives, and to those close to them. We are not ‘experts’

and therefore do not give advice.’ Helen explains that instead ‘we [end of life doulas] provide options, giving people back their choice, capacity and control.’

One of the many possibilities *Preparing the Way* doulas offer to the dying and their families, is in helping people prepare an emotional will – assisting them to get down their favourite recipes,



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think about gifting a book that is dear to them, writing messages for people in their lives, laying out the life lessons they'd like to pass on.

'In training people to be end of life doulas, I am always so inspired and moved by the absolute passion this work is met with, how doulas see this work as a calling,' Helen reflects.

'Often those who train with us have faced the difficult death of someone close and want to ensure it will be different for others, or they have experienced a holistic or peaceful experience of death and want to gift this to those they work with. These are people committed to make a difference. They provide goodness in action.'

'Right now, there are real problems in our health system that have left many nurses distressed and disillusioned, burnt-out,' Helen adds. 'They come to us wanting to return to nursing of their heart – what they signed up for – to make a difference and provide true care not just clinical services.'

It's taken thousands of hours and considerable investment, for *Preparing the Way* to gain the world's first and only government accreditation at the Certificate IV level in the VET [vocational training] system for end of life doula

services. In addition, the New South Wales government has recently funded a training pilot of sixteen places for aged care workers to undertake two units of *Preparing the Way* Certificate IV in End of Life Doula Services training, to gain skills they can then use to better support the dying, and those close to them, in their residential aged care facility, which is their 'home'.

'The full Certificate IV training requires significant commitment,' Helen explains. 'It's an eighteen-month course.' All courses are now delivered largely on-line, widening the reach of participants, and supplemented by further hands-on face-to-face training as people progress.

As Helen looks to the future, she'd love to see government [and other educational bodies] provide subsidies for those wishing to undertake this study, as there's a lot of people wanting to take up this invaluable training.

'My vision is for a doula to be as well-known and respected as a nurse,' says Helen. 'For doulas to be available in hospitals and aged care facilities, in emergency wards and after suicides, and working with police, ambulance and other first responders. For doulas to be able to bring their expertise and support to wherever death is, to provide a compassionate caring heart to people in distress.'



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