

Counting down 2014's top stories

[Tom Carney](#) / North Shore News

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Time flies! Before we get too far into the New Year, here are my picks, in inverse order, for the top five news stories for seniors in 2014.

5. The treatment of Canada's Veterans.

The nod for the most puzzling story of 2014 is our government's mistreatment of veterans. The Veterans Affairs Department is under constant cuts and clawbacks. Many vets wait months or years to access mental health disability benefits. The former Minister of Veterans Affairs, Julian

Fantino, was constantly in trouble. Why? What is the government's strategy here? Veterans are well respected in Canada. Politicians less so. Canadians aren't stupid. When a government picks a fight with veterans they lose. Always.

4. The appointment of a Seniors Advocate.

Last March the B.C. Government appointed Isobel Mackenzie as Canada's first Seniors Advocate. The office of the advocate will not investigate the individual circumstances of B.C.'s seniors. Instead it will work to identify systemic issues that affect seniors and make recommendations to government.

Here's the challenge for Mackenzie: The cases the public are most likely to care about are the tragic individual cases, like seniors with dementia wandering away from their homes, being found malnourished in hotels, or choking to death while being fed by a caregiver.

For the most part we know what the problems are and how to fix them. As an example, only approximately 10 per cent of the 176 recommendations made in 2012 by the B.C. Ombudsperson to the health ministry to improve seniors care in the province have been acted upon. We need more action, not more studies.

3. Pension Tension.

Comprehensive pension reform had been a bit of a bust. That changed in 2014 with the introduction of the Ontario Retirement Pension Plan, a defined benefit, mandatory contribution plan to supplement the CPP. It's not perfect but it might act as a stimulus for other provinces to act. Meanwhile some of the most thoughtful ideas on pension reform, like encouraging more saving for personal use and loosening the RRSP regulations are coming from seniors groups, not from government, the financial industry, or the so-called think tanks.

2. Does anyone care?

Almost a year ago, a fire at a seniors residence in Quebec killed 32 residents and severely injured 12 others. Even after a fire last April at a seniors home in Langley that left one resident dead and 12 others hospitalized, B.C. has yet to require that care homes lacking sprinklers install them.

Our National Fire Code isn't much help - it has no provision requiring sprinklers in seniors homes either.

A federal election will be held this year. When the party candidates come knocking on your door, ask them why not?

1. Saying our final goodbyes.

There are few arguments as divisive as to whether or not people should have the right to die when they choose. In 2014 we saw Gillian Bennett from Bowen Island and others choose to end their own life in a very public way partly to protest the current laws around having one's wishes heard at the end of life.

Still, others are seeking relief from the Supreme Court. Two senators, one conservative and the other liberal, are introducing a bill on physician-assisted suicide in the upper chamber after it stalled in the House of Commons.

Quebec's Bill 52, which allows people to request assisted death from a physician if they meet a number of requirements, will take effect shortly.

At least Canada's doctors have decided that it's better to get out in front of this issue rather than to hide behind it and Canadians seem much more willing to have a conversation about end of life issues than their elected officials.

Who exactly is in charge of the life and death file? Apparently, no one. Do we have the right to die? Not yet.

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