

They're not alone by phone

As Senior Citizens Week ends, **Harry Blutstein** visits a free service that helps isolated elderly people maintain a social life.

THE body can be a cruel jailer. Age, accident or frailty confine many people to wheelchairs or bed, depriving them of normal social contacts.

But, through a telephone link-up called Telelink, almost 100 such people in Victoria are able to escape the isolation of the infirm.

Telelink allows people in different parts of the state to be connected once a week by a Telecom link of up to 10 telephones, in what used to be called a party-line, for up to 45 minutes.

The program was established in 1985 by Do Care, a social services organisation sponsored by the Wesley Central Mission.

The groups talk about their health, gardening, outings, new grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Most

important, they just talk, and talk . . .

Memories can come alive during a link. Participants can join Betty as she recalls her childhood; being dressed in her favorite yellow party dress for a trip to the countryside with her father. As a special treat she is allowed to stay up to "way past her bedtime".

Betty describes with the clarity and freshness of childhood how she saw in the sky, teeming with dazzling stars on a cold April night, Halley's Comet flash past by the earth. The year is 1910. Betty remembers it as if it were yesterday, and for just a few minutes the others listening in on are with her all those years ago sharing in her wonderment.

Mavis, Florence, Margaret, Thelma and a few other friends like nothing better than to have a good old chat. None of them is mobile, and Mavis, who is bedridden, cannot leave her flat.

Margaret tells about the successful operation on her husband to remove an infected pin from his hip.

"He's been waiting nine months for the operation," she says, "and is

expected home from hospital in just a few days."

Mavis announces to the others, "I've got a granddaughter now, and they're calling her Dianne Amelia." There is a collective sigh of approval, and Margaret says, "What a very pretty name".

At the end of the session, several of the women arrange to meet for lunch the following Thursday.

There are 12 groups in Melbourne, which allows 90 people to participate in the Telelink program. The program's co-ordinator, Ms Wendy Samulenok, believes that there is sufficient demand to double the number.

But Telecom has decided not to provide the additional equipment needed to expand the service.

Telelink also organises special interest talks. Guest speakers are invited to talk on issues of the day, followed by a discussion.

Mrs Edna McAdams has been a Telelink participant and organiser for almost as long as the program has been running.

Mrs McAdams, who has just turned 80, does not let her loss of

sight or the fact that she lives alone worry her.

"The main advantage for me of Telelink," she says, "is that I can keep in touch with the outside world."

Telelink has also created friendships for her. "We've had outings and visit one another at home."

As well as enriching her own life, Mrs McAdams has been able to help others through Telelink. She recently advised a woman going blind through diabetes "on different ways to do things that she may not have thought of herself". In this way, Mrs McAdams, who has been blind for 20 years, has been able to help someone else keep independence.

As an organiser for a Telelink group, she has firm ideas on how they should be run. To avoid people getting hot under the collar, "there are only two things we don't discuss — religion and politics".

At least sex isn't taboo. And, I am told, not all they talk about on this topic are reminiscences.

Do Care can be contacted at 148 Lonsdale Street, on 662 2044.



Caring chat: Mrs Edna McAdams, blind for 20 years, keeps in touch with the outside world and helps others overcome their handicaps.

Picture: WAYNE LUDBEY