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Royal commission: Sex abuse victims fearful of being institutionalised in aged care

THE WORLD TODAY – BY PETA DOHERTY

UPDATED ABOUT 6 HOURS AGO



PHOTO Margaret Graham now lives in a public retirement village.

ABC NEWS: RYAN SCOTT-YOUNG

Margaret Graham told her children she would rather die than go into an aged-care facility.

But she had more reason than many others to dread going back to an institution.

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The 63-year-old grandmother, now living in Alice Springs, is one of the so-called forgotten Australians, the estimated 500,000 people who were in institutional or foster care in the 20th century.

"I said, 'oh, I've always planned to euthanise myself — I will not go into an aged-care facility'," she said.

Ms Graham's testimony of gross sexual, physical, and emotional abuse while in a children's home in Western Sydney is among the evidence considered by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which will deliver its final report this week.

When children's homes become nursing homes

One of the ironies is that the booming aged-care sector is dominated by the very players who ran the children's homes which have come under the microscope of the royal commission.

"When the children's homes all closed, all the church organisations went into aged care," Ms Graham said.

"It shouldn't be happening... it's just re-traumatising."

Five years of the royal commission:

- 57 public hearings
 - 444 sitting days
 - More than 1,300 witnesses
 - 8,000 private sessions of personal accounts from survivors
-

Support groups agree it is a huge problem, citing also the tendency of religious organisations to name aged-care homes after the same saints as the orphanages.

"It's really disgusting that you use the same names of the orphanages we were abused in for your aged-care facilities," said Leonie Sheedy, a co-founder of support network Care Leavers Australia Network (CLAN).

A Wesley Mission spokesperson, the organisation that ran the children's home in NSW where Ms Graham was abused, said the organisation was always mindful of the needs of all people who entered its aged-care facilities.

"We specially take into consideration the specific needs of all people we support and care for," the spokesperson said.

More concerned about the future than the past



Many witnesses at the royal commission, now aged between 50 and 85, are more concerned about their future than their past.

"For many of us, the next step is aged care, and that is really, really frightening," said Caroline Carroll, chair of national advocacy group the Forgotten Australian Alliance (FAA).

Ms Carroll said people who were abused by health professionals and staff at orphanages and children's homes were terrified by the prospect of a nursing home.

"To be blunt, a lot say they just won't do it, that they will kill themselves rather than go into an institution, their fear is that great," she said.

The sex abuse royal commission



[It went to some dark places. Here's some of what it found.](#)

Previous studies such as the Long Term Outcomes of Forgotten Australians Study by UNSW paint a bleak picture of care leavers' expectations of their twilight years.

One of the most recent studies, conducted last year on behalf of the FAA, found that fear of being institutionalised once more was their primary concern.

Advocacy groups are seeking support and funding for alternative options to aged-

care institutions and more education in the aged-care sector about the special needs of the men and women who were abused in institutions.

Nursing homes trigger traumatic memories



PHOTO [Leonie Sheedy](#) from CLAN was in an orphanage from the age of three.
SUPPLIED: CAMERON BEST

Ms Sheedy said everyday routines associated with institutional living could trigger traumatic memories.

"It can be mashed potato in an ice-cream scoop, it can be food served with a cover over it; people in normal families didn't have meals served up like a big institution," she said.

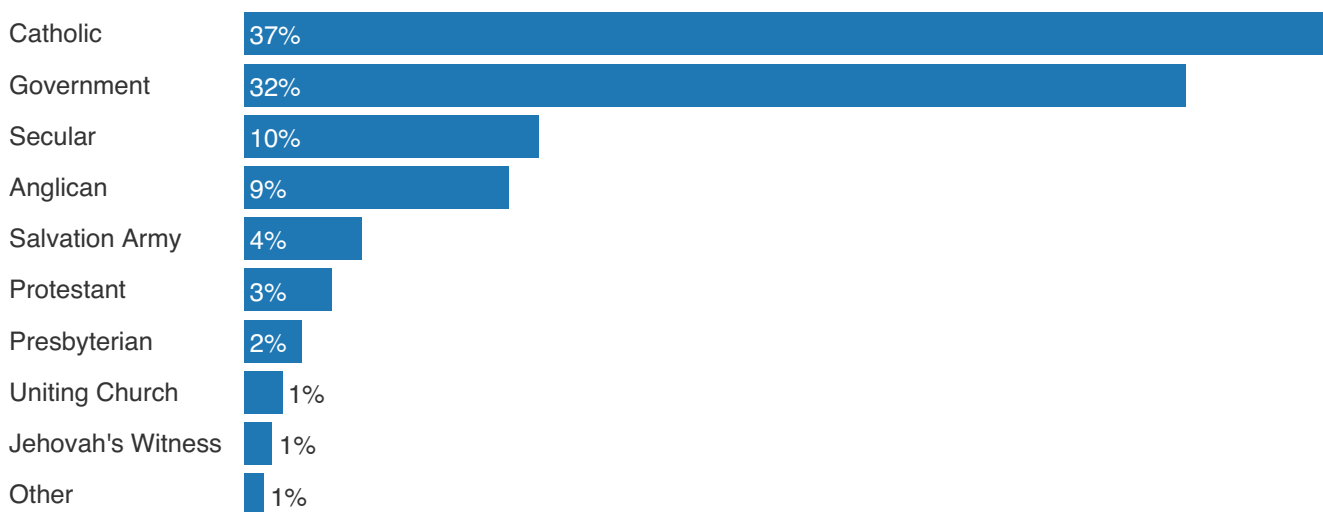
Despite receiving government information packs, Ms Sheedy said care providers were often ignorant about the needs of her members.

"Even the running of a bath could [be a trigger] because some children's heads were submerged under water to stop them screaming," she said.

Ms Sheedy, who was three years old when she was put into the care of a Catholic

orphanage in Geelong, said at least two of her members had taken their life rather than return to care.

Breakdown of abuse cases reported to Royal Commission



Source: Royal Commission

EMBED:

Chart showing breakdown of abuse cases reported to royal commission



Within the support group, aged care and death are often discussed in the same sentence.

Lyn Langanke watched her late husband Doug die in palliative care after he made a conscious decision to stop his tri-weekly dialysis treatment.

"He was overwhelmed with, 'I can't see myself doing this for the rest of my life, and I'd rather die than sit here in an institutional setting'," Ms Langanke said.

Hopes for other options in the Territory



PHOTO [Mr Myers said he could not imagine returning to an institution.](#)
ABC NEWS: TERRY MCDONALD

Ms Graham lives in the "love shack", her name for the two-bedroom unit she and her husband share in a public retirement village in Alice Springs, with no ties to a church.

She said the facility, which she described as the "gold standard", had given her peace.

"It's safe and quiet and it's got beautiful picture windows and views out of every door," she said.

With the support of counselling service Relationships Australia, Ms Graham lobbied the housing department for priority access to public housing.

Her story has led to a push by Relationships Australia in the Northern Territory to get priority public housing for other clients' needs.

Exposing a national shame



[The key moments that led to one of Australia's most shocking inquiries.](#)

At 73, Darwin man Jim Myers is holding out for an aged-care facility that will allow him to maintain a sense of independence and control.

He described what he'd like to see for forgotten Australians: "Individual accommodation where you can live your own life but still be looked after and not be told what to do every day," he said.

Group accommodation and living to a timetable brought back horrific memories he would not wish on anybody.

"It's very hard for people like me who have been through it all before to live in those conditions," he said.

"I wouldn't do it, I think I'd rather kill myself. I just couldn't imagine going back into an institution

"I think the Government should listen and make good decisions regarding us older forgotten Australians who are dying every year waiting for the Government to do something."

Concern that traumas will be relived through dementia

Federal Minister for Aged Care Ken Wyatt said he understood the victims' fear of being re-institutionalised.

"The other thing that is concerning for them is they know when people have dementia, they know that some of those memories will resurface at some point

and they're scared of that," he said.

He said the Government needed to encourage this group of people to live independently through "home care packages" and investigate affordable housing programs.

"I do give them a commitment that whilst I have responsibility for this portfolio, I will certainly look after their interests in the way we plan and consider what are the options for the way in which they are taken care of in their later years," he said.

"These are the same people who helped build this nation and we need to look after them."

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