

Blame game on care of elderly

Aged care providers report thousands of incidents ahead of royal commission8:18



The aged care sector's peak bodies have advised care providers to 'err on the side of caution and provide as much information as they possibly can' ahead of the royal commission set to commence on Friday. The Australian's Rick Morton has told Sky News that the largest aged

care providers in the country have self-reported tens of thousands of incidents of 'substandard care' in advance of the royal commission's opening day. Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the terms of reference for the royal commission last October following revelations of appalling cases of abuse.

- January 14th 2019
- a day ago
- [/display/newscorpastralia.com/Web/NewsNetwork/Network News/National/](#)

exclusive

RICK MORTON

- 12:00AM January 14, 2019
- 119 *Comments*

Tens of thousands of cases of abuse, neglect and substandard care will be revealed at the aged-care royal commission when it opens this Friday as a blame game erupts between doctors and nursing homes over the prescription of antipsychotics for chemical restraint.

The Australian can reveal the largest aged-care providers in the country have already self-reported incidents of “substandard care” at each of their services for the past five years after a data request by commissioners Richard Tracey and Lynelle Briggs with between 20,000 and 30,000 separate entries ranging from mild to severe.

Smaller providers have been given a deadline of February 8 to respond and were warned the commission could compel them to give information if it was not given up willingly.

Scott Morrison will return to parliament facing fresh questions over the eligibility of Energy Minister Angus Taylor.

Aged-care organisations and medical professionals are already preparing for the spotlight to be turned on clinical issues, the overuse of chemical restraints and who should take responsibility.

Anti-psychotics are sometimes necessary in an aged-care setting but some studies in Australia show as many as 80 per cent of residents with dementia are on strong and enduring doses of drugs such as risperidone or olanzapine, which have sedative effects and are used to “manage” the behaviours of older people.

The drugs have been linked to increases in strokes, falls and death.

HammondCare chief executive Stephen Judd told *The Australian* that any spotlight on the subject meant “it will be up to the medical profession to stand up and be accountable for its members’ prescribing practices”.

“And that doesn’t start in residential care on the day a resident enters a service,” he said. “Rather, individuals often come in with their list of meds, some of which have been inappropriately prescribed.”

Another aged-care boss, who did not wish to be named, said it was “complete bullshit” that doctors blamed aged-care staff for twisting their arms.

Australian Medical Association president Tony Bartone rejected the claims yesterday, saying residents were being doped up because nursing homes could not handle them. “This is an ongoing issue and clearly it is a specialised area but it is ... often the result of poorly trained or inadequate numbers of staff in the nursing home,” he said.

“There are occasions when you do need to resort to it, but it should be a last resort. Usually, however, residential care homes just do not have the number of personnel required for the intensity of the patient.”

Catholic Health Australia chief executive Suzanne Greenwood said it was not appropriate to put the spotlight on doctors specifically, but “it is the case that the use of chemical restraint and antipsychotics requires a prescription from a qualified medical professional”.

“It is important to include them in the opportunity to respond to the royal commission, as use of chemical restraints and antipsychotics should be a last resort,” she said.

Providers are preparing to spend tens of millions of dollars complying with royal commission processes and an expected avalanche of information requests, establishing “war rooms” on the advice of financial service industry bosses who recently finished their own supercharged inquiry. Organisations have set up dedicated and central teams with between 10 and 20 staff.

When Scott Morrison announced the highest form of inquiry for the \$17 billion-a-year sector in September, he warned Australians to “brace ourselves for some pretty bruising information about the way our loved ones have been treated”.

Last year, a 36-year-old carer pleaded guilty to two counts of common assault on an 82-year-old resident of Bupa Seaforth with the violence caught on a hidden camera over four days.

Earlier this month, a 48-year-old woman was charged with assaulting five residents at the Warrigal Community Village in Warilla where she worked.

The AMA will be making a submission to the commission which calls for minimum staffing ratios and qualifications per resident — depending on their individual needs — but Dr Bartone declined to put a number on what those ratios might look like.

“We will be a major contributor to the commission,” he said.

The issue of staff ratios is vexed — providers and even some consumer groups say they are inflexible — but the author of the Coalition’s report into workforce issues in the sector, John Pollaers, lent his name to a statement weeks after it was released urging “legislated minimum staffing ratios”.

Ms Greenwood said CHA had been invited to submit a witness statement by January 31.

“We must respond in innovative ways to address the scourge of loneliness, experienced by loved ones in aged care, and its impact on physical and emotional wellbeing,” she said.

She also said a “national conversation” was needed about asking people to pay more for their care, but only where they received increased choice, control and quality.

The data requested by the commission is to be given under different categories including “dignity”, which covers loneliness and isolation.

Leading Age Services Australia chief executive Sean Rooney told *The Australian* people - deserved to be able to tell their stories about how the system had failed them, but the broader commission terms of reference would focus on how that system should change.

“We have seen this continuing trend of financial pressure, particularly in residential care, and that’s across for-profit, not-for-profit providers, big and small,” he said.

“The system settings and funding have not kept pace with the growing volume, but also the complexity of care, and the needs and expectations of residents and their families.”

Independent industry accountants Stewart Brown have identified more than 40 per cent of all services currently have a negative trading profit (earnings before tax) as it has charted subsidy falls through the Aged Care Funding Instrument changes that saved \$1.2 billion from 2016.

“There is no doubt, you’ve already got many of the operators in the industry experiencing financial pressure and they are having to redirect resources to this process and also continue their core business of caring for older Australians, so this adds another layer to that pressure,” Mr Rooney said.

“However, aged care is an issue of national importance.

“We must all take this once-in-a-generation opportunity to get it right.”

Rick Morton



Social Affairs Reporter
Sydney

Rick Morton is the social affairs writer at the The Australian with a particular policy focus on the National Disability Insurance Scheme, aged care and population, but also writing on homelessness, social tren... [Read more](#)

Nursing home residents ‘doped for years at a time’



Juanita Westbury yesterday. Picture: Peter Mathew

- exclusive

RICK MORTON

- 12:00AM January 15, 2019
- 60 *Comments*

A damning submission to the aged-care royal commission reveals elderly nursing home residents have been doped for years at a time with psychotropic drugs, one of which is prescribed in Australia for only three-month sessions and is not approved for dementia patients overseas.

Unprecedented research by former pharmacist and current dementia researcher Juanita Westbury found the use of “as-needed” antipsychotic prescriptions in nursing homes was the highest it had been. Council on the Ageing chief executive Ian Yates has backed Dr Westbury and says the royal commission must address the issue “because it is systemic, unlike physical and sexual violence”.

“We have seen a significant shift from physical restraints to chemical restraint in the past - decade, or even longer, so now it is hidden,” Mr Yates said.

Scott Morrison will return to parliament facing fresh questions over the eligibility of Energy Minister Angus Taylor.

“Residents in aged-care homes are being turned into zombies to manage their behaviour. It is a lazy practice, it is ignorant and it masks real health issues a person might have.”

The Australian revealed yesterday that aged-care providers had urged doctors and medical professionals to take more responsibility for signing off on unnecessary prescriptions but the Australian Medical Association said too often nursing homes did not have enough staff or properly trained employees to devote to residents who needed extra attention because of dementia and associated behavioural problems. The royal commission has received tens of thousands of instances of abuse, neglect and substandard care reported by major aged-care providers after it requested the data in late November.

In her submission, Dr Westbury, from the University of Tasmania, said more than 60 per cent of nursing home residents — based on a national sample of 11,500 — were taking one or more psychotropics every day. They include: powerful antipsychotics developed to treat schizophrenia; benzodiazepines such as Temazepam; and, increasingly, antidepressants used off-label to treat insomnia or for their sedative effects, typically Mirtazapine.

“Residents were often on doses of antipsychotics for years,” Dr Westbury said. “And frequently they were on multiple agents or not taken off doses before giving them another, different drug.”

Benzos are licensed only for short-term use because of “side effects of drowsiness, language impairment, cognitive impairment (and) falls” while the consequences are even worse for antipsychotics. In her submission, Dr Westbury said: “In dementia, only one agent, Risperidone, is subsidised by the PBS for use in Australia and only then for 12 weeks in Alzheimer’s disease (not vascular dementia or Lewy Body dementia) and only for agitation and or psychosis when other treatments failed.

“When taken by people with dementia, antipsychotics increase the risk of stroke, death from any cause, heart arrhythmias and pneumonia and also cause metabolic and movement disorders. In the US, they are not licensed for use in people with dementia at all and have a black box warning of severe adverse effects.”

In a new paper to be published next month in *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Dr Westbury says the rate of “regular” antipsychotic use across the country appears to have decreased but “the frequency of ‘prn’ (as needed) antipsychotic prescribing has risen markedly and is the highest reported to date in Australia”. Where antipsychotics were prescribed, Risperidone was used in half of those cases, or about 1300 residents.

Despite results of an intervention funded by the federal government showing prescriptions of antipsychotics could be stopped or dosages lowered in about 40 per cent of cases, Dr Westbury said the Health Department told her in 2017 that an extension of the trial would not go ahead because the use of antipsychotics was “no longer a problem”.

That same year, an aged-care quality report, written by current Small Business Ombudsman Kate Carnell and Ron Paterson, said the issue was of “grave concern” and recommended that

the new aged-care quality and safety commissioner’s chief clinical adviser be required to approve the use of antipsychotic medications in nursing homes.

New legislation for both the commission and the adviser was passed last year but does not have that power in it.

Mr Yates said in many cases, nursing home residents “acted out” because they were actually in significant or persistent pain but were unable to communicate with staff about their needs and were dosed with sedatives rather than being treated for underlying problems.

The royal commission into aged care was called by Scott Morrison in September, partly in response to deaths at the Oakden nursing home in South Australia, particularly that of Robert Spriggs, whose family found out after he died in 2016 that he had been given 500mg of the antipsychotic medication Seroquel instead of the prescribed 50mg and the bruising he had experienced was “likely caused by his being strapped into a chair”.

University of Melbourne senior research associate Yvette Maker, the lead author of a paper in the *Alternative Law Journal* on responses to the Oakden scandal, wrote late last year: “Major concerns were raised in each of the reviews about the culture of secrecy, conflict and hostility to scrutiny and change, as well as inadequate leadership, at Oakden.”

[Rick Morton](#)



Social Affairs Reporter

Sydney

Rick Morton is the social affairs writer at the The Australian with a particular policy focus on the National Disability Insurance Scheme, aged care and population, but also writing on homelessness, social tren... [Read more](#)