

ABC NEWS

'Terrified' ageing child abuse survivors begin transition into aged care

ABC News Breakfast By Patrick Wood

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PHOTO: Alby suffered abuse in multiple institutions throughout his youth. (Supplied)

Thousands of ageing Australians who were abused while in institutional care as children have now grown up and face the "terrifying" prospect of entering an aged care system that reckons with its own allegations of misconduct.

A landmark new program — to be announced today and backed by \$500,000 in federal funding — will look at how to transition these so-called forgotten Australians into care without re-traumatizing them.

"It's a major concern, because I've got friends where, if it came to going into an aged care environment they would rather commit suicide than be re-institutionalised," child abuse survivor Alby said.

"Many, many friends have told me, 'No way. I'd neck myself ... rather than go back into an institution!'"

At 63, Alby is one of an estimated 500,000 forgotten Australians who had traumatic experiences in state care, out-of-home care or institutional care as children before 1989.

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Key points:

- A child abuse survivor says some people would rather die than go into care again
- The new national program will help ageing abuse survivors transition to aged care
- The program has been developed as a royal commission hears shocking stories of misconduct

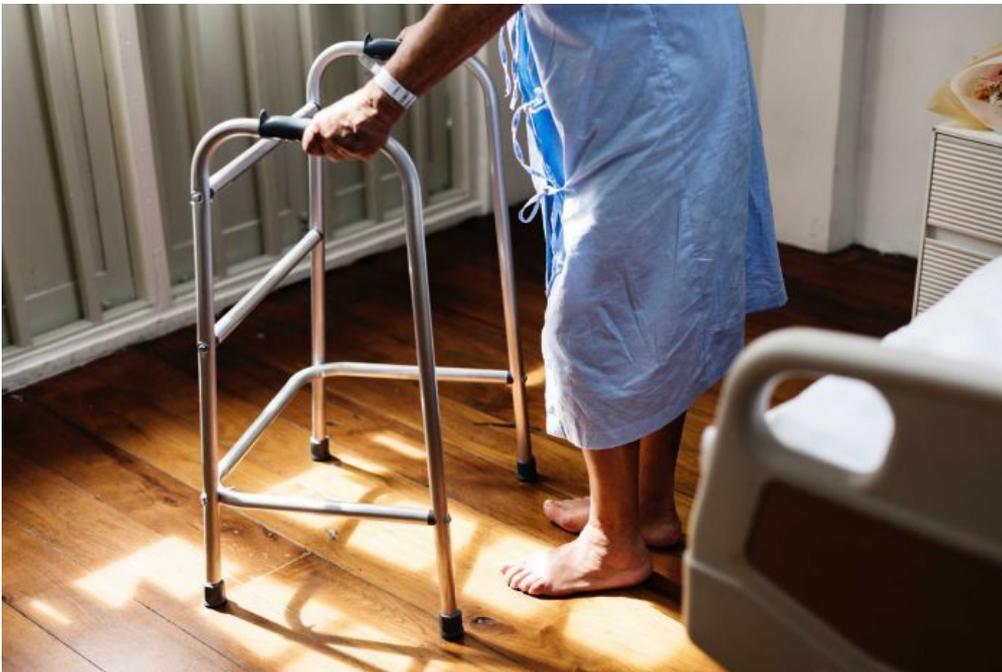


PHOTO: Many forgotten Australians have a real fear of aged care. (Unsplash: rawpixel)

He was the child of Dutch immigrants and, at four years old, accidentally drank from a bottle of kerosene thinking it was a soft drink.

After being rushed to hospital authorities deemed he was at risk of neglect and he was taken from his parents and three siblings, who didn't have the connections or English language skills to fight back.

He was put into an orphanage and placed on what he calls "experimental drugs" that gave him rashes and nightmares and made him wet the bed.

"Every morning if I wet the bed ... they'd strip the bed and make me put the wet sheets over my head and march to the laundry in front of everybody. It was humiliating," he said.

Then there was the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of the staff who ran the orphanage. This continued up until he was able to go back to his family two years later.

Alby was ordered to stay on the medication until, at age nine, his mum had mastered English enough to demand he be taken off them.

But Alby said the damage was done. He had lost all respect for authority.

The rest of his childhood and early adult life was spent clashing with schools and police, bouncing in and out of state care, where he repeatedly suffered physical abuse at the hands of institution leaders and another case of serious sexual abuse by another boy.

"It really scares me to go into an institution again because of the abuse that I suffered," he said this week.

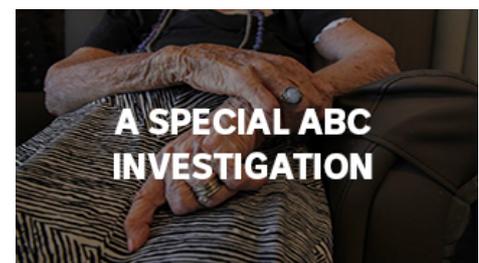
"The main thing for me is going into an institution where you have no control of anything."

New program offers hope

Alby's concerns echo that of thousands who have told their story to South Australian not-for-profit Helping Hand, which has been exploring this issue in aged care for years.

Now, it has received government funding to turn its guidelines into a program for forgotten Australians, to be rolled out nationally and titled Care, The Second Time Around.

Our stories on aged care



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Program officer Diana O'Neil said the documented abuse people experienced as kids ranged from emotional and physical neglect, right through to physical and sexual abuse.

She said their fear of aged care was very real.

"They are terrified. Terrified."

"It's things like fear of medication without consent, fear of loss of control — in effect, detention.

"Fear of medical procedures. Concerns about gender of the staff.

"Not having been believed and not having been listened to [in the past] is actually the big thing that drives their anxiety around this."

Aged Care Minister Ken Wyatt announced the \$500,000 in funding for the new program, saying anyone, regardless of their background or life experience, should have access to safe care.

The funding will allow Helping Hand to develop a program that will include:

- Tools to enable aged care providers to screen and plan for people with traumatic backgrounds
- Access to support for forgotten Australians who do go into care
- Education for aged care providers on dealing with forgotten Australians

The funding comes as the royal commission into aged care continues, hearing shocking stories of neglect and mistreatment of elderly people.

Ms O'Neil said the program her team was developing would dovetail into any recommendations the royal commission was likely to make when it finalises its report later this year.

"There's no doubt that some of the issues that people have been raising are issues of concern for forgotten Australians," she said.

"If the aged care sector was able to recognise and respond well to forgotten Australians, they'd be recognising and responding well to everybody."

As for Alby, he's not so convinced. But he hopes that by sharing his story and raising the issue, it might create change for others.

He was invited to share this story at the recent child abuse royal commission and said the experience made him feel "like somebody lifted a fridge off my shoulders".

"Hopefully out of our words of our generation it will go somewhere for the next generation," he said.

"That's my major concern — the next generation should not suffer like we did."

If you or anyone you know needs help:

- Lifeline on 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800
- MensLine Australia on 1300 789 978
- Beyond Blue on 1300 22 46 36
- Headspace on 1800 650 890

Family shares heartache with royal commission



Barbara Spriggs had a gut feeling that things were terribly wrong when her husband Bob was admitted to the Oakden Older Persons Mental Health facility in Adelaide.