

NATIONAL AGED CARE

Some older Australians consider residential aged care a 'death sentence'

By **Julie Power****Updated** June 19, 2019 – 6.57pm, first published at 6.26pm

Residential aged care far from family and country is seen as a "death sentence" by older Aboriginal people, a senior University of Western Australia researcher Roslyn Malay told the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety in Broome.

And to "lock" them away far from families would deprive the community of an "internet" of cultural knowledge, said Venessa Curnow, the director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Management Unit at Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service.



Kimberley region in WA. SHUTTERSTOCK

It would also rob the community of the privilege and opportunity to care for the elderly, she said.

"Looking after our older people is part of who we are," Ms Curnow, who was born in the Torres Strait Islands, said.

"We've got cultural practices ... and rituals that remind us that old people are an important part of our lives," she said.

"[They] teach you the songs, the languages, so you have an innate respect for them and their place in community."

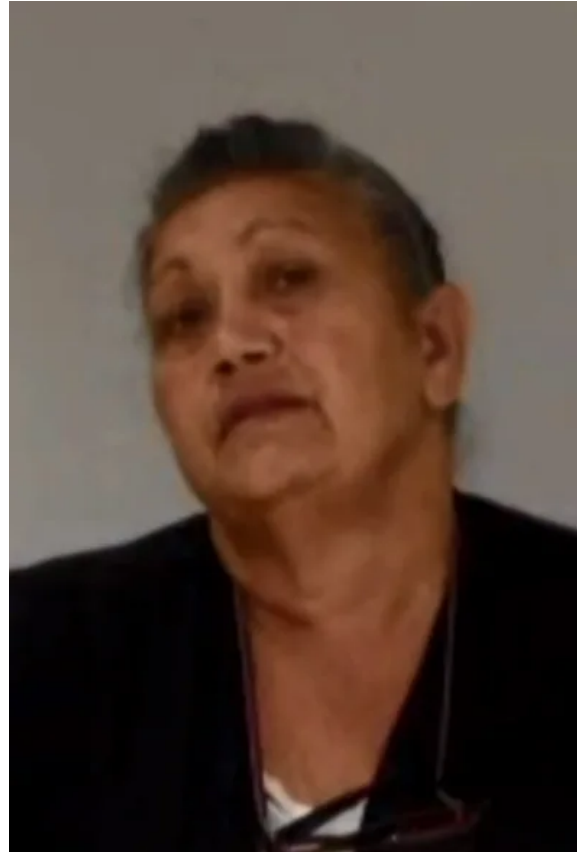
Ms Malay, an Aboriginal woman born in Halls Creek in the Kimberley, said older Aboriginal people were "the keepers of our law of our culture, of our land ... our culture".

"If they weren't here, everything would go pear-shaped," she said.

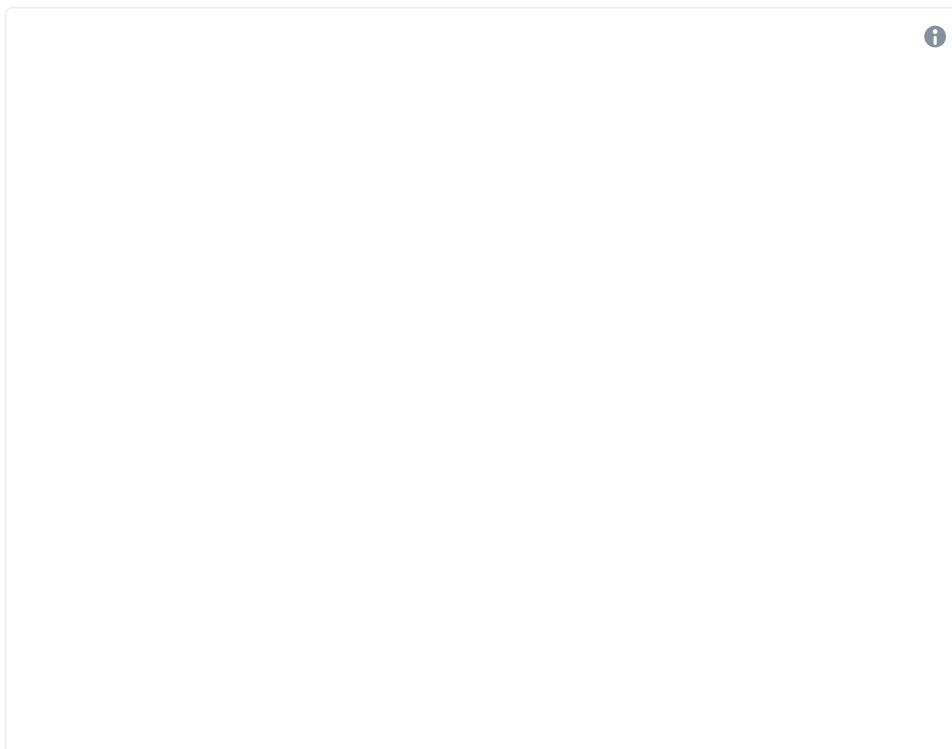
In three days of hearings, the Commission heard Aboriginal people often avoided non-Indigenous run aged-care services and homes because of racism, lack of Indigenous staff and fear that they wouldn't respect their culture and beliefs.

Non-Indigenous medical staff said it could take months, even years, to develop the trust of Indigenous patients. Without it, communities would block access and the patient may refuse care.

In remote communities requiring long flights or drives over bumpy roads getting care often required going to major urban centres. Accessing services was difficult for many Indigenous people who spoke three or four languages before English.



Roslyn Malay, a researcher specialising in aged care in remote areas.





The government online portal, My Aged Care, for accessing care was described as "dreadful", difficult for people who didn't understand English, and hard to access in areas without reliable internet or mobile coverage.

Summing up the three days of hearings, Paul Bolster, counsel assisting the commission, cited examples of community based care that worked.

But he said there was a "degree of uncertainty, a lack of direction, and a lack of uniformity" in approach across remote Australia.

"Whilst the new aged care quality standard makes express reference to cultural safety, it would seem relatively clear that the concept is understood as many different things to different providers."

In his evidence, Professor of geriatric medicine Leon Flicker at the University of WA attributed the under representation of Indigenous people in aged care to "frank racism" and a lack of "cultural safety".

Only one per cent of residential aged care beds are occupied by Indigenous peoples, although they constitute three per cent of the population.

He said this lack of cultural safety and awareness manifested itself in "insensitive application of rigid rules" or restrictions on the number of family members who could visit.

Ms Malay and Ms Curnow called for aged care facilities to be run and staffed by local Aboriginal people.

They said it was cheaper and easier to teach aged care skills to an Indigenous staff member than it was to educate a non Indigenous person on cultural safety.

Ms Curnow said teaching a non-Indigenous aged care worker "cultural competence" was a skill built up over a long period of time.

"And it requires immersion and a lot of exposure to culture which, unless you're living in the culture every day, you know, it's much easier to have a trained person employed than it is to teach someone all of those nuances, particularly because we've got such a diverse range of cultures as well," she said.



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