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Victorian aged care facility rostering five staff to more than 100 patients, royal commission hears

BY ANNE CONNOLLY

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PHOTO The commission was told aged care facilities were understaffed and workers were often underpaid.

ABC NEWS: NATASHA JOHNSON

Nursing homes are notoriously secretive about their staffing ratios. But buried among the hundreds of witness statements submitted to the aged care royal commission was a table showing how one of the country's biggest for-profit chains employed just five staff for 106 residents on the night shift.

Key points:

- The Japara Mirridong aged care home rostered just one registered nurse overnight
- Union head Paul Gilbert told the inquiry staff there had just six minutes to wash and dress patients
- The Health Workers Union said aged care staff could earn more working at supermarkets

The figures came from the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) and they're about Japara — a company publicly listed on the stock exchange.

The table shows how Japara Mirridong in Bendigo employs 15 personal care workers in the morning, which drops to 11 after lunch, and finally to just four personal care workers and one registered nurse for the night shift.

Paul Gilbert, assistant secretary of the Victorian branch of the ANMF said the ratios were "madness".

A document tabled at the aged care royal commission outlining patient/staff ratios at the Japara Mirridong Aged Care Home.

	Morning			Afternoon			Night			
	Body	RN	EN	PCA	RN	EN	PCA	Body	EN	PCA
Cassidian Wing	16		0	0		0	0	0	0	0
Catherine House Wing	30		0	0		0	0	0	0	0
Kensington Wing	30		0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Larchell Wing	30		0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Total	106	1	0	16	1	0	0	0	0	4

While there is no time or time on additional RN may be used instead of an EN, the above reflects the standard rostering since the addition of the additional 16 beds in Cassidian


PHOTO The table shows a ratio of one registered nurse to 106 patients is "standard" at the home.

SUPPLIED: AGED CARE ROYAL COMMISSION

"People are getting six minutes to get a resident out of bed, washed, in a chair, in a lounge room. It's just madness," he told the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

According to the union head, the reason for the low staffing levels across the industry is reforms made by the Howard government in 1997.

Previously, 70 to 75 per cent of federal government funds were quarantined for staff wages.

Those nursing homes that did not comply had to return the unused funds to the government, and it was stringently monitored.

But following the changes, that quarantine of funds for wages disappeared.

"From this time onwards, homes were required to meet accreditation, rather than allocate protected funding to nursing," Mr Gilbert's statement said.

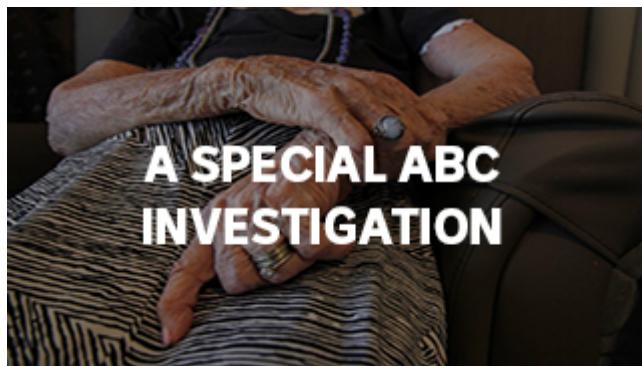
Mr Gilbert said the effect was almost immediate, with another Japara home, George Vowell in Victoria, dropping its proportion of spending to 56 per cent.

'I could get paid more working on the checkout of Aldi'

It is not just staff numbers under the spotlight but also the pay rates.

"The comment I hear is, 'I could get paid more working on the check out of Aldi', and it's technically true," the Health Workers Union's Lisa Alcock told the royal commission.

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Personal care workers are supposed to be paid \$20 to \$25 an hour, but the union said it had to step in when workers were grossly underpaid.

She cited one worker being paid \$15 an hour for the past seven years, working six days a week.

Ms Alcock didn't name the provider but said: "I estimate this underpayment is in excess of \$120,000. This matter is ongoing."

Both unions spoke of the difficulties of negotiating enterprise agreements because providers consistently said they were underfunded.

Darren Mathewson from Aged and Community Services Australia said the viability of smaller providers — particularly in regional areas — would be under threat if wages increased, even if the Federal Government increased its aged care funding.

"The Commonwealth announces an increase to subsidies by 1.4 per cent and, therefore, for that organisation which may have limited reserves," he told the commission.

"And I'm probably talking about single service regional providers who may be in the midst of bargaining, then it becomes a real pressure valve in wanting to meet the wage claims which may well be valid of their employees and then continuing to operate".

 The outside of the Mirridong aged care home.



PHOTO The Japara Mirridong aged care home in Bendigo.

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