

WINE NEWS

ANALYSIS

Why the Government blocked a law forcing nursing homes to reveal staff and food budgets

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Updated Mon 10 Feb 2020, 11:23am



PHOTO: When it comes to food, a study of 800 nursing homes shows the average spend is just \$6 a day. (Unsplash: rawpixel)

Sydney's streets were thick with smoke as the blazes took hold on December 5 last year. That may explain why few noticed or cared about the final sitting day in Canberra.

But what happened in the Senate that day shows just how strong the ties that bind the aged care lobby and government really are.

At 9.30 that day, some crucial amendments to aged care legislation were introduced which would force nursing home to reveal how they spent their \$20 billion of taxpayer funds each year — specifically, how much went to staff, food and "the amounts paid out to parent bodies".

Unlike hospital and child care centres, aged care facilities can employ as few staff as they like because there are no staff-to-resident ratios in nursing homes.

When it comes to food, a study of 800 nursing homes shows the average spend is just \$6 a day.

When the crucial vote came, the Government shot it down

The Senate vote was taking place just five weeks after the scathing interim report from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

Among its findings of a "sad and shocking" system which was "inhumane, abusive and unjustified", the commissioners also commented on the lack of transparency in aged care, with the numbers of complaints, assaults and staff numbers all kept secret from the public.

"My amendments are all about transparency and accountability — and, boy, do we need more of this," said Senator Stirling Griff from Centre Alliance, who proposed the amendments.

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When the crucial vote came, Labor, the Greens, Centre Alliance and Jacqui Lambie supported it. But the Government voted against it and, with the help of Pauline Hanson, the reform was defeated.

It might seem an odd choice for Pauline Hanson, who has previously rallied against the aged care sector for "rorting and malpractice", but it shouldn't be surprising that the Government voted it down.

The influence of lobbyists

The aged care industry has been successfully lobbying governments for years. The influence of the industry through government committees, thinktanks and policies is well known and is being rightly questioned at the royal commission.

For example, when the Queensland Government proposed laws requiring nursing homes to publish their staff numbers last year, the federal Department of Health sent a six-page document arguing against it, saying it might "confuse or mislead" families and "appears to create a reporting burden on providers with no clear benefits to consumers".

If you think the Federal Government's objections sound a lot like those of the aged care lobby, you wouldn't be wrong.

In fact, the industry group Leading Aged Services Australia (LASA) argued in its own submission that few families would be interested in accessing a website with such information and that the numbers could be used "to push a particular medically based care model (which may be contrary to the preferences of residents)".

That's an argument LASA has been using for years. It's code for arguing against more registered nurses for fear it spoils the "home-like" atmosphere of an aged care facility.

Others might argue that the hundreds of stories told to the royal commission of poor wound care, misdiagnosis and failure to send sick residents to hospital may have something to do with that lack of a "medical model".

Currently there's no requirement, except in Victorian state run facilities, for an RN to be employed at a nursing home.

The aged care lobby doesn't want that to become a national trend.

Are you worried about aged care in Australia?



The aged care royal commission continues and so does our investigation. Let us know if you have a story or issue you'd like the ABC to look into. Email aged.care@abc.net.au to tell us your story.

The staff speaking out for residents



In the ABC's biggest crowd-sourced investigation, current and former aged care workers reveal the chronic neglect, mistreatment and understaffing in facilities across the country.



PHOTO: The Senate vote was taking place just five weeks after the scathing interim report from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. (Reuters: Enrique Castro-Mendivil)

'Why can't we know how many staff there are?'

The industry and Federal Government's opposition to the argument against making the staff numbers public didn't wash with the Queensland Government.

"We report the number of teachers to students in classes, educators to children in child care, why the hell can't we know how many staff there are in aged care facilities?," said Queensland Health Minister Stephen Mills, who successfully passed the legislation and says he will "name and shame" nursing homes which refuse to make staff numbers public.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison will argue that the Government voted against the federal moves for financial transparency because it doesn't want to introduce any major reforms before the final report from the royal commission.

However, that excuse didn't stop the Federal Government from its massive reform of putting the publicly funded Aged Care Assessment system out to tender last year.

The move to privatise it was widely denounced by state ministers (including from the NSW Liberal Government), advocates and the medical profession.

But the aged care lobby groups are big supporters of the change.

They have the power and the purse strings

As the royal commission restarts hearings tomorrow in Adelaide, we're likely to hear a lot more of government and industry "aligned" views.

They will be battling the growing evidence though. Like a 30 per cent increase in complaints; studies showing our spend on aged care is well below other developed countries and that our staffing levels are at the bottom end also.

Commissioners Briggs and Pagone have called for a complete overhaul of this failing system.

Though the evidence is already there, they will face the same battle that grassroots advocates have been fighting for some time — a solidified force of industry and government who control both the power and the purse strings.

Topics: royal-commissions, aged-care, carers, health, older-people, social-policy, health-policy, australia

This is what neglect looks like



Hidden camera footage captured in this blind 80-year-old's room shows the cracks in quality care in Australia's multi-billion-dollar aged care system.
