

NATIONAL CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

# 'It's really hard': Couples split as nursing homes lock out families

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By [Robyn Grace](#)

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Elderly couples have been separated and families left distressed as private nursing homes lock down in a move dubbed "lazy and alarmist".

Nursing home carers spent Wednesday fielding phone calls from desperate and confused families, distressed after private facilities took lockdowns much further than the government's already tough COVID-19 restrictions.



People are being prevented from visiting spouses as nursing homes lock down in an effort to avoid COVID-19. GETTY IMAGES

Under the rules, aimed to stop the spread of the deadly coronavirus among especially vulnerable older Australians, Prime Minister Scott Morrison limited aged-care residents to a maximum of two visitors a day, for "short periods" of time.

But many private aged-care operators, including Regis, Estia and Arcare, are in complete lockdown, despite no confirmed cases in residents or staff.

A private nursing home carer in Melbourne, who asked not to be named, said staff had been overwhelmed with calls from family members confused and distressed over what was to come.

Three husbands who would normally spend all day with their wives were not allowed to enter the facility, separating the spouses for the first time in years.

Nursing homes are well prepared to deal with the coronavirus threat, says Health Minister Greg Hunt.

One resident will turn 97 on Sunday. Staff are uncertain whether she will be able to celebrate with family, or even if they can deliver gifts.

A male resident went to the door 10 times, awaiting his wife's regular arrival. He ultimately phoned her, crying and asking where she was.

The nurse said she was mostly worried for the husbands who visited the nursing home daily. They would be the ones left alone.

"It's hard. It's really hard," she said.

The facility was well stocked with protective equipment such as masks. But already GPs were consulting with patients via the phone instead of coming in and the nurse was worried staff would ultimately be asked to stay on the premises.

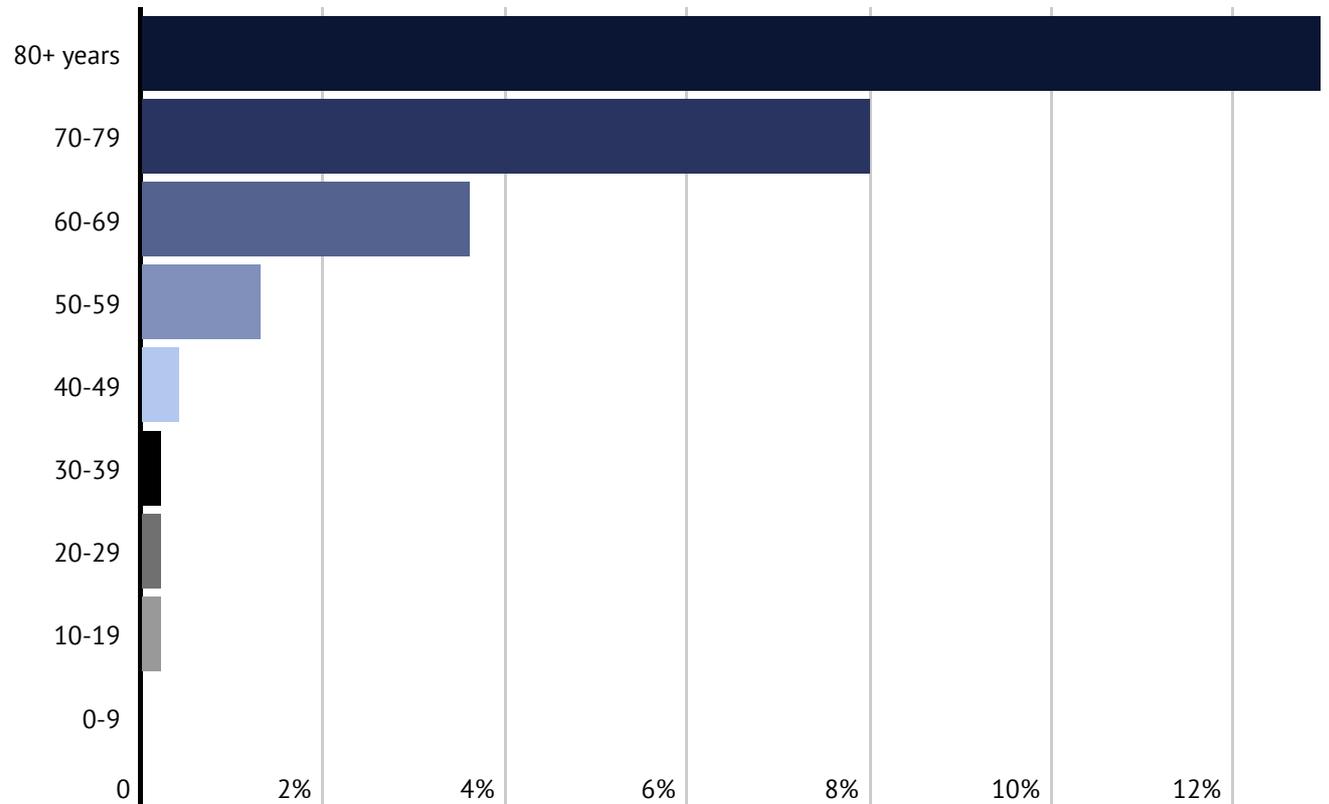
In Torquay, Kristin Cosgrove and her children live moments away from her 97-year-old grandmother's nursing home but are now forced to wave at her from the street instead of taking her out for coffee.

The home is also in complete lockdown, preventing even family members from entering.

The three children, aged from 9 to 16, have made cards for their great-grandmother, telling her they're thinking of her.

## COVID-19 deaths by age group in China

Based on more than 72,000 cases in China until February 11



Source: Chinese Center for Disease Control paper released on February, based on **72,314 confirmed, suspected and COVID-19** in China, published in the Chinese Journal of Epidemiology.

"My hope is she understands what is happening and knows we haven't forgotten about her," Ms Cosgrove said.

"I imagine it will be a lonely few weeks for some of the residents."

In Kew, Madeleine Grummet's 78-year-old mother is also in lockdown.

Ms Grummet said the facility had been "amazing" but the family, who would normally visit three times a week, was already feeling the emotional strain.

"For my mum, who doesn't go out on her own, that contact is fundamental for her day-to-day wellbeing," she said.

Ms Grummet's mother has early-stage Alzheimer's, which she said was in some ways a buffer "from the madness outside".

But if the lockdown stretched on, Ms Grummet said she expected the pressure to mount.

Ian Yates, chief executive for the Council On The Ageing, welcomed the government restrictions but has called for facilities to exercise discretion based on normal patterns of behaviour.

Spouses who visited loved ones all day, for example, would breach restrictions for short visits but Mr Yates said if they stayed in their partner's room, nursing homes "should be exercising compassion".

Mr Yates described the move to complete lockdown as over the top, unless facilities were located near a community with outbreaks.

"So-called 'lockdowns' are the opposite of a sensible and compassionate response and should only be a temporary emergency response to an internal or nearby community outbreak, while longer term measures are worked out," he said.

"They should never be a long-term response. As a long-term approach lockdowns are a lazy, alarmist and counter-productive reaction, the opposite of being compassionate and caring."

By 10.30am on Thursday, there had been six deaths in Australia from COVID-19. Nationwide there were 568 confirmed cases, with 121 in Victoria.

Private aged-care representative bodies Leading Age Services Australia and Aged Care Guild said the government restrictions were minimum measures and most homes had gone beyond them.

LASA CEO Sean Rooney said in many instances decisions are being made on a case-by-case basis to balance risk aversion with compassion.

ACG executive director of operations Nicholas Brown said facilities would continue to support essential and end-of-life visits. Providers were offering regular contact with families through video conferencing.

Half the people who have died of COVID-19 in Australia to date had been nursing home patients. Mr Rooney said the rules were critical to save lives.

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## Updated health advice for Australians

The symptoms of coronavirus include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath; and
- Breathing difficulties

If you suspect you or a family member has coronavirus you should call (not visit) your GP or ring the national Coronavirus Health Information Hotline on **1800 020 080**.



**Robyn Grace**



Robyn Grace is a journalist at The Age.