

## Aged care nurse disgusted by the system, worries Royal Commission report will be in 'too-hard basket'

ABC Southern Qld / By David Chen

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Former aged care nurse Amanda Gorton says she was "stressed and disgusted" with the system. (ABC Southern Qld: Nathan Morris)

When Amanda Gorton started work at an aged care home in southern Queensland in 2018, she loved her job.

But the registered nurse said after changes at the privately-run TriCare Aged Care Residence in Toowoomba, she left in September 2020, stressed and disgusted with the system.

"Absolutely awful. I went home often in tears because I thought, 'It can't stay like this. It has to get better,'" Ms Gorton said.

Ms Gorton has spoken out as the Aged Care Royal Commission delivered its final report to the Governor-General on Friday, ahead of the report's release to the public next week.

She wants to see a complete overhaul of the aged care system, but fears it may be in the "too-hard basket" for the federal government, despite the Royal Commission's recommendations.

### Key points:

- Former aged care nurse Amanda Gorton has detailed her experience working at TriCare in Toowoomba
- The aged care home was found not to have effective plans to manage any COVID-19 outbreaks in 2020
- The federal aged care watchdog has found the facility is now compliant with regulations



TriCare aged care home in Toowoomba (ABC Southern Qld: Lucy Robinson)

### PPE locked away

During the height of the coronavirus pandemic last year, Ms Gorton said there was a lack of safety equipment at the facility, where staff shortages left one nurse responsible for up to 70 residents.

"It was quite scary, because we were always worried there was going to be an outbreak and we knew we didn't have the equipment," Ms Gorton said.

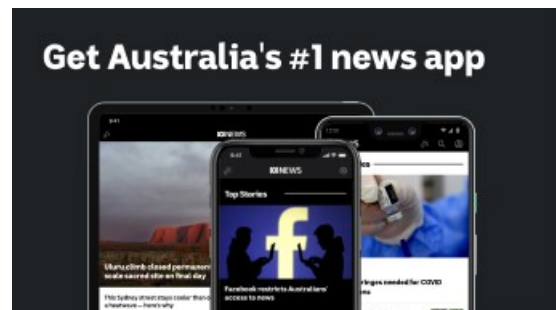
"A lot of the equipment we did have was actually locked in a shed at the back."

She said complaints about the quality of food and the lack of staff to authorities from the facility's residents went unanswered.

"[Residents] asked some of our staff members to get in touch with the [Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission], which we did. They never heard back from them," she said.

"A lot of the shift, I would spend it comforting people ... a lot of the residents were in tears, they wanted to move."

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"Some of them did not have any family members that could advocate for them, so they depended on us nurses to advocate ... but we can only do so much."

The ABC has contacted TriCare several times, but it has not responded yet.

### COVID-19 preparation

The federal aged care watchdog, the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, inspected the aged care residence in Toowoomba in August 2020.

The Commission found TriCare's infection control program was ineffective and plans to manage a potential COVID-19 outbreak had not been implemented.

It also found staff had been given cloth masks, but they were not given consistent information about when the masks should be washed or worn.

Ms Gorton said the masks had been made from discarded bed linen.

"[The masks] weren't actually covering your face correctly and they were causing pressure injuries on staff members behind their ears," she said.

The commission's follow-up inspection in January 2021 found TriCare had since "implemented a number of improvements to address the deficiencies identified".

The commission said that in the past two months, improvements had been made, such as the purchase of additional personal protective equipment, including face shields.

### **Royal Commission report**

The Royal Commission's interim report into Aged Care, handed down in late 2019, revealed systemic failures in the sector, finding that many elderly Australians were neglected and forced to live in "unkind and uncaring" conditions.

The Queensland Nurses and Midwives Union (QNMU) expects the final report will be even more damning.

"We know from the interim report ... it demonstrated the shame that is our national aged care system — there needs to be urgent action taken," QNMU Secretary Beth Mohle said.

"It's hard to know where to begin on what's broken [with the aged care system.] Just about everything is broken."

Ms Mohle said the QNMU wanted the federal government to implement minimum staffing requirements and for there to be greater transparency from aged care providers on where funding was spent.

"The community can't have any guarantee if it's inappropriately spent, so there's no accountability for that taxpayer funding."

The QNMU is also pushing for better pay and conditions for workers.

"The workforce is significantly underpaid and undervalued; the employment arrangements are absolutely woeful," Ms Mohle said.

"So many of the workers are on minimum contracted hours, eight hours per week for example ... they're rostered for more than that but they're only guaranteed say one shift per week."

Ms Mohle said she was worried aged care providers were planning to blame workers for failings identified by the Royal Commission.

"The [workers] are very fearful, they feel like they're being set up to take the fall for what is fundamentally a system's failure."



The Royal Commission handed its findings to the Governor-General on Friday. (ABC News)



QNMU Secretary Beth Mohle says minimum staffing requirements are needed for aged care homes. (Supplied: QNMU)

## Aged care complaint

Toowoomba resident Kat Cherry also wants to see nurse-to-patient ratios implemented at privately-run aged care homes.

Ms Cherry made formal complaints about her father's treatment at another aged care home, including that he was forced to have cold showers.



Toowoomba woman Kat Cherry says there are not enough aged care nurses on wards.  
(ABC Southern Qld: Nathan Morris)

For Ms Cherry, the complaints process was very difficult.

"Families are stressing out big time because they don't know what's going to happen next ... when it's continually happening over and over again, there's no faith there," she said.

"There's just not enough nurses on wards ... we've waited half an hour for a call bell to be answered."

## Change needed

Ms Gorton, who has been an aged care nurse for six years, said there needed to be greater transparency from operators on how they spent federal government funding

"If we do have a COVID-19 outbreak, or the next pandemic, aged care will not be prepared at all," she said.

"The whole system is disgusting, and elderly people are in a vulnerable state — we're not looking after them.

"They can't just keep throwing money at aged care ... it needs to actually be dismantled ... and we need a new way of doing aged care."

The federal government has committed to respond to the Royal Commission's report by the May Budget.