

1 November 2019

Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety Interim Report Summary

Introduction

The Interim Report *Aged Care in Australia: A shocking tale of neglect* released on 31 October 2019 is reflective of those who have had unacceptable experiences of aged care, and the VHA supports action to address the systemic causes of these matters. The report provides a platform from which to take that action and, moving forward, offers the opportunity to take action to highlight and identify ways to replicate the many examples of high-quality and innovative care being provided in aged care services by a committed workforce, whose morale is being tested during this process.

The Interim Report covers much, but not all, of the work of the Royal Commission through to September 2019; much of the Royal Commission's work on quality and safety considerations will be in its Final Report. While the Interim Report provides an insight into the Commissioners' thinking to date, it does not include specific recommendations. The Royal Commission invites submissions in response to the content of the Interim Report.

The Royal Commission's Final Report will be handed to the Governor-General on 12 November 2020. That report will set the framework for a complete overhaul of the aged care system — from system philosophy and design, to interactions with health and disability services, to workforce, funding and regulation.

Overview of the Interim Report

The Interim Report states that the aged care system needs fundamental reform and redesign. It identifies systemic problems in aged care with a system that:

- is designed around transactions, not relationships or care
- minimises the voices of people receiving care and their loved ones
- is hard to navigate and does not provide information people need to make informed choices about their care
- relies on a regulatory model that does not provide transparency or an incentive to improve
- has a workforce that is under pressure and under-appreciated and that lacks key skills.

The Commissioners describe the aged care system as 'a shocking tale of neglect', and that:

- the aged care system fails to meet the needs of its older, vulnerable, citizens. It does not deliver uniformly safe and quality care, is unkind and uncaring towards older people and, in too many instances, it neglects them
- it is a sad and shocking system that diminishes Australia as a nation
- a fundamental overhaul of the design, objectives, regulation and funding of aged care in Australia is required.

The Commissioners identified three areas where immediate action should be taken:

- to provide more home care packages to reduce the waiting list for higher level care at home
- to respond to the significant over-reliance on chemical restraint in aged care, including through the seventh Community Pharmacy Agreement
- to stop the flow of younger people with a disability going into aged care, and speed up the process of getting out those young people who are already in aged care.

The Commissioners state:

- The overall impression we are left with is of a system that is failing, but there are some positive stories

emerging from our inquiries. Provider organisations and consumer representative groups have highlighted great quality care and caring environments.

- We have heard many examples of providers who deliver innovative and effective models of care. Crucially, we have heard about these positive examples not just from the providers themselves, but from the people they care for. There have also been many examples of individual staff members dedicating themselves to providing exemplary and compassionate care, despite the challenges of their working environment. All of these positive examples provide us with confidence that a better aged care system is possible.
- It seems that providers and staff are currently succeeding due to their own passion and dedication. The aged care system provides no incentive or encouragement for these achievements. In short, they are succeeding despite the aged care system in which they operate rather than because of it.
- The structure of the current system has been framed around the idea of a ‘market’ for aged care services where older people are described as ‘clients’ or ‘customers’ who are able to choose between competitively marketed services. But many older people are not in a position to meaningfully negotiate prices, services or care standards with aged care providers. The notion that most care is ‘consumer-directed’ is just not true.
- Despite appearances, despite rhetoric, there is little choice with aged care. It is a myth that aged care is an effective consumer-driven market.
- Since the Royal Commission began its work, there have been calls from several quarters for government funding to aged care to be significantly increased, without waiting for our Final Report and recommendations. These interventions are essentially a variation on a theme which has haunted this area of government policy for far too long: short-term solutions, which will at best temporarily stave off the worst problems and, at worst, produce another set of unintended outcomes requiring further inquiries and reviews and further injections of public funds without addressing the underlying causal factors. These limited interventions are not enough to deliver an aged care system that meets the needs of older people.

Overview of the Interim Report by section

Volume 1 of the Interim Report contains key information about aged care and conclusions the Commissioners have reached over the course of hearings held from February to September 2019. There are seven chapters in Volume 1 which flag recommendations for reform to be contained in the Final Report:

Chapter 4 An overwhelming sense of loss

Every person’s experience of aged care is different. While some people’s stories have been positive, others have been overwhelmingly distressing. The aged care system should not be a signifier for loss, abandonment and fear. The Royal Commission will, over the next 12 months, examine whether there are societal barriers to the enthusiastic acceptance of reforms to aged care. The Final Report will recommend a whole-of-system reform and redesign.

Chapter 5 Finding the door

The ‘front door’ to our aged care system – an online portal on the My Aged Care website and a call centre – has proved costly and has failed to provide adequate information to people about aged care and how to access it. The system could be improved to provide users with information to compare quality, safety and cost of services in their area, to find help, and to find accurate information about waiting lists.

Chapter 6 The lottery

The aged care system is unable to deal with the level of demand for home care services. Waiting times of up to 12 months or more for high care Level 4 Home Care Packages are unacceptable. People are dying on the waiting list. The Royal Commission believes that significant additional funding is needed immediately and in the future to increase access to Home Care Packages.

Chapter 7 Elders are our future

Evidence shows that aged care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needs to be delivered in ways that are flexible, adaptable and culturally safe. This includes assessment pathways, aged care integrated with other services,

and facilitating aged care on Country, where possible. The Royal Commission is exploring ways to support aged care services to be staffed and managed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Chapter 8 Restrictive practices

The Royal Commission has revealed instances where the use of restrictive practices have been inhumane, abusive and unjustified. A lack of permission in the use of restraint and prolonged use of powerful chemical restraints is common in Australia. Early action by the government in the context of current negotiations on the seventh Community Pharmacy Agreement would be an important first step towards correcting the problem.

Chapter 9 Workforce matters

A poorly skilled, underpaid workforce under pressure to provide care is the picture so far revealed. The quality of care that people receive depends very much on the quality of the paid carers, their working conditions, their leadership and engagement. The Royal Commission will continue to examine workforce issues over the next year, including: attraction and retention; education and training; choosing the right staff; remuneration and careers; continuity of care; staffing levels and staff mix; and leadership.

Chapter 10 Falling through the gaps: Younger people in residential aged care

The Department of Health told the Royal Commission that the 6,000 younger people with a disability living in aged care is a 'somewhat intractable problem'. The Commissioners found there was a lack of will and effort to address the issues that have left young people in aged care. Now that the NDIS exists, Commissioners do not accept that the problem is intractable and consider that swift action needs to be taken to fix the situation so that younger people with disabilities are able to live in the community, as other young people do.

Volume 2 of the report contains detailed overviews of the public hearings from February up to and including hearings in Darwin and Cairns in July 2019, including the Royal Commission's findings in case studies conducted at those hearings.

Volume 3 contains a number of appendices, including summaries of the nine community forums the Royal Commission has held throughout Australia since February 2019.

Background Paper 8: A History of Aged Care Reviews

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety recently released its eighth background paper – *A History of Aged Care Reviews*, which is now available to download on the Commission's website.

<https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/news/Pages/media-releases/background-paper-8-a-history-of-aged-care-reviews.aspx>

The paper provides an overview of 18 major public reports and inquiries related to publicly-funded aged care that have taken place in Australia since 1997, and looks at government responses to each of these.

The paper states that, 'Successive Australian governments have shown a lack of willingness to commit to change or to adopt recommendations from a multitude of reviews and inquiries into aged care over more than 20 years.

'While governments have responded with ad hoc reforms to elements of the system, they have not been able to resolve the underlying problems with a system that has failed to provide the Australian community with the assurance of quality and safety in aged care that it expects.'

Aged Care Royal Commission seeks submissions on workforce

Following the third Melbourne hearing, which focused on workforce issues, the Aged Care Royal Commission announced it is seeking written submissions relating specifically to the aged care workforce.

Issues can relate to: staffing levels; registration schemes; remuneration and working conditions; skill, knowledge and competency levels of staff; workforce leadership; and institutional changes. These policy submissions will be accepted until close of business on Friday 6 December 2019. More information can be found at:

<https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/submissions/Pages/workforce-submissions.aspx>

The full Interim Report is available here: <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/news/Pages/media-releases/interim-report-released-31-october-2019.aspx>



For further information contact

Emma Liepa
Director of Policy and Strategy
emma.liepa@vha.org.au

Heather Witham
Advisor, Aged Care
heather.witham@vha.org.au

03 9094 7777