

Productivity Commission
Inquiry into Caring for Older Australians
Submission from the Retired Teachers Association, NSW

The Retired Teachers' Association (NSW) has a membership of over six thousand throughout New South Wales, with a small number in other states. For many years our association has raised its concerns regarding aged care facilities and has urged governments to allocate more funds to aged care and to seek more accountability from operators. We therefore welcome this opportunity to present this submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry. We have noted that almost all older people have a horror of "entering a nursing home". There are many reasons for this – not wanting to leave family and loved ones, having the prior experience of visiting a poorly-run facility, knowing that a nursing home is the final stage of a person's life. These feelings are not helped by the consistent media accounts of neglect and abuse in nursing homes.

Monitoring

We believe that the residents of aged care facilities are among the most vulnerable and helpless people in our community. Families of residents can become advocates for them when things go wrong, but some residents who are single, retired women have no such resources (and many of these people are ex-teachers). We believe that it is of the greatest importance to have proper monitoring of facilities in order to ensure that those without a voice are not taken advantage of. Proper monitoring, with findings made public, would do much to allay the fears that people have about entering a nursing home. The monitoring and assessment of standards of care and quality of life in aged care facilities is essential in order to ensure that residents, families and the broader community can have confidence in the aged care system. At present the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency lacks transparency in responding to complaints. Often non-compliance is not detected during the Agency's audits. Sometimes a home will pass these audits and yet later it will be found to have failed its duties under the Aged Care Act. In many cases it requires a complaint to the Department of Aged Care, or publicity in the media, before the Agency takes any action.

Because the RTA considers the Accreditation Agency to be seriously flawed, we would recommend that a new monitoring authority be formed, and that such a body should include representatives from health professionals', carers' and older people's associations. The findings of the monitoring authority should be made public, and larger penalties for serious non-compliance should be established.

Funding

The Retired Teachers Association is opposed to the imposition of "bonds" for nursing home care. People who enter nursing homes are in need of care because they are sick or demented. Admittance requires the endorsement of a doctor. In no other area of the public health system are patients required to pay a bond. The majority of nursing home residents do not spend a long time in care. Forcing them to sell their homes to pay bonds, we believe, would be totally unjustified.

The Federal Government should increase its funding for aged care, with consideration being given to an increase in the Medicare levy for this purpose. At the same time, such funding should not be given unless proper accountability on the part of proprietors is sought. The spending of taxpayers' money should always be independently audited and the accounts of homes should be made publicly available.

Staffing

The RTA has been concerned for some years about the increasing numbers of poorly-trained, under-qualified and in some cases, unsuitable staff in nursing homes. It is estimated that 70% of people who live in nursing homes need complex nursing care each day. Yet the number of registered nurses in homes has seriously declined. Only trained nurses should be administering medication, but the shortage of trained staff has seen unqualified staff being asked to do procedures that they would not be allowed to do in a public hospital. One reason for the shortage, is that nurses in aged care are paid substantially less than nurses in other sectors. Another is that proprietors have taken advantage of the Federal Government's decision not to place requirements on proprietors to show how much is spent on direct care, including nurses' wages.

The workforce in aged care should receive decent salaries, in line with staff in hospitals. They should have opportunities for advancement so that they remain committed to working in this area. This type of employment is unsuitable to a casual untrained workforce which is constantly changing. In aged care facilities there must be adequate trained nursing staff on duty at all times. The number of nursing staff required, having been determined by experts, must be prescribed in the regulations governing the system of aged care. There must be provision also for independent doctors to attend facilities when required.