

Services for older Australians and their companion animals must be an integral part of future aged care services.

Submission to the Productivity Commission: Inquiry into Caring for Older Australians.

This submission acknowledges the fact, often mentioned by policy developers, that ageing is not a roadway to privations like sacrificing normal lifestyle options. One of the most normal in Australia is keeping a companion animal. Among the draft recommendations of this Inquiry “to guide future policy change” are that the aged care system should:

- Promote independence and wellness of older Australians and their continuing contribution to society
- Ensure that all older Australians needing care and support have access to **person-centred** services...
- Be consumer-directed, allowing older Australians to have choice and control over their lives

All of the above are entirely consistent with promoting and maintaining the relationship between older Australians living at home and their companion animals. The report attached: ***“Identifying the Need for Companion Animal Support for the Home and Community Care Target Population”*** (2008) Fitzpatrick, L, Moore, K. et al, surveying 500 HACC eligible Australians reveals that:

- 84% considered their pets either essential or very important to their wellbeing
- 83% were concerned about their pets if they were unable to care for them adequately
- 97% considered their pet as part of the family

Despite this, the only representation of pets in assessment for services is as a negative, ie: as an OH&S hazard. This is far from consistent with the aforementioned principles.

The majority of older Australians heading for retirement have been productive in employment and have put in their fair share of taxes. Companion animals are also major contributors to the economy saving the annual health bill an estimated \$1 billion (at minimum) annually due to the superior health of Australians with companion animals. They are also major contributors to the community in many roles from companions to the isolated, to service personnel in customs, the police force and disability.

However, while much discussion promising services, programs, strategies and so on to maintain quality of life and wellness with the emphasis on a “person-centred”, (ie: acknowledgement of what the client values) approach to assessment of needs and delivery of services has taken place at political and community levels a significant and alarming gap in services to older Australians with companion animals remains largely unacknowledged despite the fact that there is very considerable research from diverse disciplines demonstrating the beneficial and supportive influence of companion animals to the elderly. On this issue, those vested with the responsibility for the development of genuinely holistic, inclusive and client centred aged care services appear to be asleep at the wheel.

The Opposition Leader, Mr Abbott, might be an exception. In a pre election speech in August 2010 regarding his aged care funding package of \$935 million, no less than \$14 million was earmarked for “a pet therapy program”.

This has to be considered a good start but Mr Abbott’s announcement was aimed at pet visiting and therapy programs for older Australians in residential care. However, as we know, the vast majority of older Australians reside at home. Many of them with pets. It is estimated that at least 16,000 Home and Community Care clients in Victoria alone may be in need of services to support their pets. To date there are only three aged care funded pet support programs in Victoria with a total of about 200 clients.

At 63% Australian households have amongst the highest number of companion animals in the western world. Indeed, it’s hard to imagine a day passing without media stories or advertising about pets. It is a mistake to assume that keeping a pet declines dramatically at the onset of retirement. In the abovementioned report 76 service providers were surveyed. Some of the key findings were:

- 80% believed isolated clients would have better quality of life with a pet
- 66% believed that a pet support option in their service would be helpful to clients

Many commented that clients’ difficulties in keeping a pet due to frailty, etc., were not about the pet but the lack of services available to assist the client to keep the pet.

The Productivity Commission Inquiry is likely to lead to major change in the way aged care services are delivered in the future. To continue to ignore, underfund and marginalize the importance of companion animals to Older Australians living at home is to overlook an opportunity to enhance wellness, quality of life and the ultimate objective – continued independence.

Unfortunately, due to incorrect advice about the deadline for submissions, this is a very brief summary of my request that the Inquiry accept the attached report and make a commitment to including specific and identified funding for companion animal support for Older Australians living at home.