

22 March 2008

Minister for Ageing - Mrs Justine Elliot

Better protection for frail aged Australians

In response to figures on aged care facilities under the previous government, the Minister for Ageing, Mrs Justine Elliot, today outlined a range of tough measures to improve quality to protect frail and aged Australians.

The figures are reported in News Limited newspapers.

As part of the measures, next financial year, the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency, the independent watchdog, has been instructed to undertake a record 7000 visits (up from 4000) to aged care facilities across the nation.

Other measures taken by Mrs Elliot to strengthen the current protocols and protections for nursing home residents include:

- Expanding the requirement for staff to undergo police checks;
- Strengthening the powers of the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency - the independent agency which accredits aged care facilities;
- Requiring clinical staff to check on actual residents in a facility as a part of their investigations; and
- Reviewing the Aged Care Act to close loopholes and/or make improvements to quality in aged care.

“For the past 12 years the Howard government neglected residential aged care and neglected our seniors. I plan to change that,” Mrs Elliot said.

“As a former police officer, I know that sometimes life is tough and hard decisions have to be made.

“I make no apology for the fact that my priority is ensuring that frail aged and vulnerable seniors are protected.

“Our seniors built this nation and they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

“There is much to be done in this area, and many improvements to be made. I am rolling up my sleeves and getting on with the job.” Mrs Elliot said.

Instructing the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency to undertake a record 7000 inspections (up from 4000)

Last year the agency undertook almost 4000 inspections of residential aged care facilities.

This year Mrs Elliot has instructed the Agency to undertake more visits.

“I am advised that the Agency will now undertake up to 7000 inspections. This is an important step in ensuring that frail aged Australians are receiving the quality care they need and deserve.

Police Checks

In Australia, there are more than 2,870 accredited nursing homes with 167,070 aged care beds. More than 116,000 people are employed as direct care workers (nurses, personal carers and allied health workers. (**Source: National Aged Care Workforce Census and Survey February 2004**)

Currently only staff with unsupervised access to residents are required to have police checks.

Mrs Elliot wants the police checks to be extended to all employed staff from accredited aged care facilities - those who have both supervised and unsupervised access.

"I have instructed the Department of Health and Ageing's Office of Aged Care Quality and Compliance to review this area immediately," Mrs Elliot said.

Strengthening the powers of the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency

Mrs Elliot said she will close loopholes in nursing home regulations.

"The Aged Care and Accreditation Agency has advised me that it's not an offence to mislead them," Mrs Elliot said.

"I find this absolutely breathtaking. How could the previous government create an accreditation body and then limit its powers?"

"I intend to change that. As the Minister for Ageing I've asked my department to urgently examine these measures and report back to fix it.

"It is essential that the agency have the necessary powers to undertake their inspections and investigations thoroughly.

Requiring investigation staff to check on residents in a facility rather than just the paperwork

Mrs Elliot has instructed the Department of Health and Ageing to strengthen guidelines on how investigation staff respond to concerns about clinical care including during serious disease outbreaks in nursing homes.

"During a disease outbreak, staff will be required to check on actual nursing home residents rather than just examining documentation and meeting with management and staff," Mrs Elliot said.

Under the revised guidelines - being developed in conjunction with state, territory and local health authorities - nurses investigating concerns about clinical care will be given more specific guidance to ensure gaps in care can be identified and acted upon.

Reviewing the Aged Care Act to close loopholes

In light of the exposure of the inadequacy of the previous government's legislation, the Minister for Ageing is having the Aged Care Act reviewed to see where further measures are necessary to protect frail aged Australians.

Aged Care in Australia - the facts

The Department of Health and Ageing oversees more than 2870 accredited nursing homes with 167,070 aged care beds across Australia, providing permanent residential care each year to one in every 10 Australians aged 70 or over.

There are 1.9 million Australians aged 70 years and over, comprising 9.3 per cent of the population. The

average age of people entering residential care is 82.

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