

Understanding the Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards: A Guide for Personal Care Staff

Introduction: Setting the Stage for Enhanced Aged Care

The landscape of aged care in Australia is undergoing a significant transformation. In response to the recommendations put forth by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, the Aged Care Quality Standards have been thoroughly reviewed and subsequently strengthened. These enhanced standards are specifically designed to elevate the safety and overall quality of care provided to older individuals, placing their unique needs and preferences at the forefront while upholding their dignity and respect.

The strengthened standards offer a clear and detailed vision of what constitutes high-quality, person-centred care within the aged care sector. These new benchmarks for quality are anticipated to take effect from 1 July 2025, coinciding with the introduction of a new Aged Care Act.¹ This alignment of the standards with the new legislation signifies a comprehensive reform effort aimed at improving the aged care system.

Personal care staff play an indispensable role in translating these standards into tangible improvements in the daily lives of residents. This report serves as a guide to help you, as personal care staff, develop a thorough understanding of these strengthened standards. It will explore what these standards entail, how they will influence the experiences of residents, the implications for your specific role, and the key distinctions from the quality standards that were previously in place.

The Evolution of Quality in Aged Care: From 8 to 7 Strengthened Standards

Previously, the Australian aged care system operated under a framework of 8 Quality Standards.⁶ The new system introduces a streamlined approach, consolidating and enhancing these into 7 Strengthened Quality Standards.¹ This reduction in the number of standards is not a diminishment of focus, but rather a strategic move to minimize duplication and employ clearer, more concise language, leading to a more focused and integrated approach to quality in aged care. A significant development within the strengthened framework is the introduction of two new, dedicated standards:

Standard 5, which specifically addresses Clinical Care, and Standard 6, focusing on Food and Nutrition, particularly within residential care settings.¹

The creation of these dedicated standards underscores the critical importance of these areas, directly responding to findings from the Royal Commission that highlighted the need for improvements in clinical care and the provision of adequate and enjoyable nutrition. Furthermore, certain concepts that were previously addressed as separate standards, such as feedback and complaints mechanisms, human resources management, and the provision of services and supports for daily living, are now integrated within the broader framework of the 7 strengthened standards.¹ This integration suggests a more holistic perspective on quality, where these essential components are viewed as integral aspects of overall care delivery rather than isolated elements.

Key Differences at a Glance: Old vs. New Quality Standards

To provide a clear understanding of the changes, the following table summarizes the main differences between the previous 8 Quality Standards and the new 7 Strengthened Quality Standards:

Feature	Old Standards	New Standards
Structure	8 Quality Standards	7 Strengthened Quality Standards
New Dedicated Standards	None specifically for Clinical Care or Food/Nutrition	Standard 5 (Clinical Care), Standard 6 (Food and Nutrition - residential care)
Enhanced Focus	Focus on various aspects, but less detailed in some areas	Stronger, more detailed focus on person-centred care, diversity, dementia, governance, partnership
Integration	Separate standards for feedback, HR, daily living	Integrated within the 7 standards
Measurability	Less emphasis on measurable outcomes	Designed to be more measurable with enforceable outcomes
Person-Centred Language	Language less consistently from the older person's perspective	Expectation statements from the older person's perspective

This table offers a concise overview of the fundamental shifts in the quality framework. The reduction in the number of standards, coupled with the introduction of dedicated standards for clinical care and nutrition, signifies a more targeted and comprehensive approach. The increased emphasis on measurability and the person-centred language reflect a commitment to ensuring better outcomes and experiences for residents.

A Closer Look: The 7 Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards and Your Role:

The following section provides a detailed examination of each of the seven Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards and specifically outlines what each standard means for your role as personal care staff.

Standard 1: The Individual

The core intent of Standard 1 is to ensure person-centred care, emphasizing the dignity, respect, individuality, diversity, choices, independence, cultural safety, and the right to take risks of each resident.⁵ For you, as personal care staff, this standard is foundational. It means truly recognizing each resident as a unique individual, treating them with dignity and respect, and understanding their distinct identity and cultural background.¹⁶ It involves supporting their independence and respecting their choices, even when those choices might involve a degree of risk.¹¹

Your interactions should make residents feel safe, welcome, and genuinely understood, ensuring that the care provided is culturally sensitive.¹⁸ Building a professional and trusting relationship with each resident is key, working in partnership with them in all aspects of their care. Respecting their personal privacy, especially during personal care tasks, is also paramount.

The repeated emphasis on the concept of "dignity of risk" across various resources¹¹ signals a significant change in approach. It requires a careful balance between ensuring the safety of residents and respecting their autonomy to make choices about how they live their lives. Effectively implementing this principle will likely necessitate additional training and support for personal care staff to confidently navigate situations where a resident's choice might involve potential risks. This approach recognizes that older people have the right to live how they choose, even if their decisions involve some risk.¹¹

To ensure these principles are embedded in practice, facilities need clearly documented systems and processes, along with monitoring tools to assess staff adherence and identify areas for improvement. Engaging with residents to understand their experiences and care outcomes is also crucial.¹⁹

Standard 2: The Organisation

Standard 2 focuses on how the aged care home is managed and governed. While much of this standard pertains to the governing body, it has direct implications for you through the provider's systems for quality, risk management, incident management, and information management.¹¹

This standard ensures that the provider demonstrates strong leadership and accountability, maintaining high standards of care and a commitment to continuous improvement.¹⁶ For you, this means the provider must ensure you have the necessary planning, support, skills, and training, including specific training on dementia, cultural safety, and person-centred care, along with adequate resources to perform your job effectively and safely.²¹ It also encompasses the establishment of systems that allow you to provide feedback or make complaints without fear of any negative consequences.²¹

The strong emphasis on organizational systems for feedback and incident reporting²¹ highlights a commitment to greater transparency and accountability within aged care homes. Personal care staff need to be well-informed about these systems and feel empowered to utilize them effectively to contribute to the ongoing improvement of care quality. Without this awareness and empowerment, the intended benefits of these systems may not be fully realized. Therefore, comprehensive training and a supportive organizational culture are essential.

Standard 3: Care and Services

This standard addresses the practical aspects of how care is delivered to residents. It emphasizes the importance of safe, effective, and person-centred care that meets the individual needs, goals, and preferences of each resident, ultimately optimizing their quality of life and overall function.¹¹

For you, this involves actively participating in the ongoing assessment and care planning process in partnership with the resident. You will use the individual care and services plan to guide your daily work, ensuring that the services you provide align with the resident's specific needs and preferences.²⁷ Effective communication, both

verbal and non-verbal, is crucial, as is the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to any changes or deterioration in a resident's condition.²⁷ Managing risks, making appropriate referrals to other healthcare professionals when necessary, minimizing the use of restrictive practices, and ensuring thorough communication during shift handovers or transitions in care are all integral components of your role within this standard.

The focus on "reablement" in several resources²⁶ signifies an expectation for personal care staff to actively support residents in regaining or maintaining their independence and functional abilities. This requires a shift in approach from simply performing tasks for residents to actively encouraging and assisting them to do things for themselves, which may necessitate the development of new skills and techniques.

Standard 4: The Environment

Standard 4 pertains to the physical environment within the residential aged care home. Your role here involves actively contributing to the maintenance of a clean, safe, comfortable, and welcoming environment for all residents.¹¹ This includes ensuring that any equipment you use, or that is provided to residents, is safe, clean, and in proper working order.³¹

A critical aspect of this standard is the rigorous adherence to infection prevention and control procedures, encompassing practices such as thorough hand hygiene, the correct use of personal protective equipment, and the consistent application of standard and transmission-based precautions.³¹

The repeated emphasis on infection prevention and control³¹ underscores its vital importance in safeguarding the health and well-being of both residents and staff, particularly in light of recent public health challenges. To effectively implement these measures, personal care staff require ongoing training and readily accessible resources to ensure adherence to best-practice guidelines and contribute to a safe living and working environment.

Standard 5: Clinical Care

This new, dedicated standard specifically addresses health-related care, which is often delivered in collaboration with nursing staff. Your role in this area involves supporting the delivery of safe and quality clinical care within the boundaries of your training and responsibilities.¹¹ This includes assisting with the comprehensive delivery of care as outlined in the resident's care plan, diligently observing for and promptly reporting any changes or deterioration in a resident's condition.³⁸ If your training

permits, this may also involve assisting with the safe administration of medications. You will also play a role in supporting infection control measures related to clinical procedures and in managing high-impact risks such as falls prevention, pressure injury prevention, assisting with safe swallowing, continence care, and pain observation.³⁸

Providing support to residents with cognitive impairment and assisting with palliative and end-of-life care, always with a focus on respecting the resident's dignity and comfort, are also key aspects of your role under this standard.

The introduction of this dedicated standard for clinical care³⁶ signifies a heightened focus on the health and medical needs of individuals residing in aged care facilities. This may necessitate that personal care staff develop a more in-depth understanding of clinical procedures, potential risk factors, and the critical importance of accurate observation and timely reporting.

Standard 6: Food and Nutrition

Standard 6 emphasizes the significant role that meals and drinks play in the overall well-being of residents in residential care. Your contribution is vital in ensuring a positive dining experience for each resident.¹¹ This includes assisting residents to eat and drink safely and enjoyably, providing appropriate support and prompting as needed.⁴³ You will also help ensure that meals align with each resident's individual needs, preferences, and any specific dietary modifications, including texture modifications.⁴³

Serving food in an appealing manner and at the correct temperature is also important, as is observing and reporting any concerns regarding a resident's food or fluid intake or their overall enjoyment of meals.⁴³ Additionally, you will help ensure that residents have access to snacks and drinks at any time, in accordance with their needs and preferences.

The focus on the "dining experience," in addition to the nutritional content of the food⁴², indicates a recognition of the social and emotional dimensions of mealtimes for residents. Personal care staff are instrumental in fostering a positive dining experience through their interactions with residents, their attention to the dining environment, and the way meals are presented.

Standard 7: The Residential Community

This standard broadens the scope beyond basic care to encompass the overall quality of life within the aged care home. Your role involves helping residents feel safe, comfortable, and truly at home within the residential community.¹¹ This includes supporting them to participate in meaningful activities that they enjoy, helping them maintain their social connections and relationships, including intimate relationships, and facilitating their connection with the community outside the home if they wish.⁵¹ You also play a part in supporting smooth transitions for residents, for example, when they are admitted to or discharged from the hospital.

The emphasis on "community"¹⁷ highlights the importance of addressing potential social isolation and loneliness often experienced by residents in aged care settings. Personal care staff can actively contribute to building a strong sense of community by encouraging resident interaction, supporting their participation in various activities, and fostering a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere within the home.

Impact on Residents: How the Strengthened Standards Improve Lives

The strengthened standards are fundamentally designed to ensure that residents are treated with the utmost dignity and respect, free from any form of discrimination.¹⁰ Their unique identity, cultural background, and diverse experiences are to be valued and actively supported.¹⁰ Residents will be empowered to make informed decisions about their care and to live their lives according to their choices, with appropriate support provided when needed.¹⁰ They can expect to receive safe, effective, and person-centred care and services, including clinical care, that are tailored to meet their individual needs, goals, and preferences.¹⁰

The standards also guarantee that residents will enjoy food and drinks that are not only nutritious but also appealing and reflective of their personal choices, served in a pleasant and inclusive dining environment.¹⁰ Furthermore, residents have the right to live in a physical environment that is safe, clean, comfortable, and allows them to move freely.¹⁰ They should feel safe and supported in maintaining their relationships and connections with the broader community.¹⁰

Ultimately, these standards aim to ensure that residents are supported by knowledgeable, capable, and caring staff and that they can easily provide feedback or raise concerns without any fear of reprisal.¹⁰ The shift towards person-centred language within the standards¹⁰ directly reflects a commitment to prioritizing the individual experiences and empowering the residents in their care journey.

The direct incorporation of recommendations from the Royal Commission ⁵ into these strengthened standards demonstrates a clear intention to address systemic issues and bring about tangible improvements in critical areas such as diversity, dementia care, clinical care, and food and nutrition, leading to more comprehensive and responsive care for all residents.

Your Vital Contribution: Bringing the Standards to Life Every Day

You, as personal care staff, are the cornerstone in translating these strengthened standards into meaningful improvements in the daily lives of residents. Your everyday work directly contributes to meeting the expectations set forth in each standard.

- **Respecting the Person (Standard 1):** By treating each resident with dignity, upholding their privacy, actively listening to their choices, supporting their independence, and engaging with them in a way that fosters a sense of safety and understanding, you are directly embodying the principles of Standard 1.
- **Providing Care and Services (Standard 3):** Accurately following care plans, assisting residents with their daily living activities, diligently observing their well-being, communicating effectively with colleagues, and promptly reporting any changes or deterioration in their condition are essential to meeting the requirements of Standard 3.
- **Supporting Clinical Care (Standard 5):** Assisting with the personal care aspects of clinical care delivery, accurately observing and reporting any changes related to clinical conditions or risks (such as skin integrity, pain levels, or swallowing difficulties), and supporting safe medication practices if applicable, are crucial contributions to Standard 5.
- **Enhancing the Environment (Standard 4):** Your efforts in helping to maintain a safe, clean, and comfortable environment, promptly reporting any hazards you identify, and strictly adhering to all infection prevention and control practices are fundamental to achieving Standard 4.
- **Assisting with Food and Nutrition (Standard 6):** Supporting residents during mealtimes to ensure a positive and enjoyable experience, providing assistance with eating and drinking safely, verifying that residents receive the correct meals according to their needs and preferences, and carefully observing their intake all directly contribute to meeting the goals of Standard 6.

- **Building Community (Standard 7):** Encouraging residents to participate in activities they find meaningful, facilitating social interaction among residents, supporting their connections with family and friends, and generally helping residents feel safe and at home within the facility are all vital aspects of Standard 7.
- **Being Part of the Organisation (Standard 2):** Understanding and consistently following organizational policies and procedures, actively participating in mandatory training programs, contributing to a culture that prioritizes safety and quality, and effectively utilizing feedback and incident reporting systems are all essential for upholding Standard 2.

By consistently demonstrating these actions in your daily interactions with residents, you play a pivotal role in making the Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards a tangible reality and enhancing the lives of those in your care.

The Significance of Strengthened Standards: A Commitment to Quality and Safety

These strengthened standards hold immense importance as they establish clear, more detailed, and measurable expectations for the quality and safety of aged care services.¹ This increased measurability allows for more effective monitoring and enforcement, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for residents. They place a strong emphasis on the rights, individual needs, and personal preferences of each resident, embodying the principles of person-centred care.¹

The overarching aim of these standards is to enhance the overall quality of life for individuals residing in residential aged care facilities. They provide a robust framework for continuous improvement in the services provided, encouraging a culture of ongoing development and refinement. Furthermore, the standards are designed to ensure that staff members are equipped with the necessary support, well-defined systems, and appropriate training required to deliver the highest possible standard of care.¹

Reflecting on Your Practice: Questions for Understanding and Implementation

To further your understanding and application of these strengthened standards, please consider the following questions:

- Based on Standard 1, how can you support a resident's 'dignity of risk' while ensuring their safety?
- Thinking about Standard 6, what are two specific actions you take during mealtimes to contribute to a positive 'dining experience'?
- According to Standard 5, why is accurate observation and reporting of seemingly small changes in a resident's condition (like skin redness or appetite loss) so important?
- How does Standard 7, 'The Residential Community', go beyond just providing basic care needs?

Conclusion: Embracing the Future of Aged Care

The introduction of the Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards represents a significant step forward in the ongoing pursuit of excellence in aged care in Australia. The shift from eight to seven standards, the introduction of dedicated standards for clinical care and nutrition, and the enhanced focus on person-centred principles all underscore a commitment to improving the safety, quality, and overall experience for residents.

As personal care staff, your role in bringing these standards to life is absolutely vital. By embracing these new expectations and consistently applying them in your daily practice, you will directly contribute to a more supportive, respectful, and empowering environment for the individuals in your care, shaping a brighter future for aged care.

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