



Australian
Nursing &
Midwifery
Federation

NATIONAL AGED CARE SURVEY 2019

- COMMUNITY MEMBER COMPANION REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY MESSAGES



June 2019



About the ANMF

The ANMF is Australia's largest national union and professional nursing and midwifery organisation. In collaboration with the ANMF's eight state and territory branches, we represent the professional, industrial and political interests of 275,000 nurses, midwives and carers across the country.

Our members work in the public and private health, aged care and disability sectors across a wide variety of urban, rural and remote locations. We work with them to improve their ability to deliver safe and best practice care in each and every one of these settings, fulfil their professional goals and achieve a healthy work/life balance.

Our strong and growing membership and integrated role as both a professional and industrial organisation provide us with a complete understanding of all aspects of the nursing and midwifery professions and see us uniquely placed to defend and advance our professions. Through our work with members we aim to strengthen the contribution of nursing and midwifery to improving Australia's health and aged care systems, and the health of our national and global communities.

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The ANMF is grateful to the nurses, aged care workers, other staff, and especially to the community members, residents, family members, and loved ones who shared their views, experiences, and insight into the current situation of Australia's aged care system.

It is the ANMF's hope that this report, and the first 2019 ANMF National Aged Care Survey Report, will underpin and hasten the desperately urgent actions needed to improve aged care in Australia to provide the level of quality, safety, and appropriateness that all recipients of aged care services deserve.



Key Messages

- There are consistent similarities between the data provided by community members and aged care staff as reported in the first 2019 ANMF National Aged Care Survey Report.
- Failure to ensure safe, quality care for aged care residents is the result of continued, systemic failures in Australia's aged care sector and ongoing inaction by governments and providers.
- Since the 2016 ANMF National Aged Care Survey, the situation has worsened; indifference and lack of respect for aged care residents is increasingly prevalent and quality and safety appear to be declining.
- Community members consider staffing numbers, skills mix, staff training/qualifications, and experience to be at the forefront of concerns with the aged care system and to negatively impact upon the ability of staff to provide safe, quality care for residents.
- Low numbers of staff and poor skills mixes result in poorer health and wellbeing outcomes for residents and poor working conditions for staff.
- Community members want staff with the "right attitude" to work in aged care and are concerned that some staff are neither trained nor equipped with the right skills and personal characteristics to work with vulnerable residents.
- Community members have concerns with staff who do not appear able to be well understood by residents due to English language ability.
- Lack of staff and inappropriate skills mixes mean that even the most basic care needs of residents, such as bathing, eating, and toileting are missed, neglected, or rushed.
- Adequacy of staffing to provide for high care needs is an emerging concern; community members recognise a lack of registered nurses and poor access to general practitioners and other health care staff results in poor or missed care for residents.
- Community members note that deteriorating staffing levels have resulted in greater safety risks for residents.
- Government funding for aged care is inadequate and widely regarded to be misdirected away from providing safe, quality care to residents or utilised inappropriately.
- Community members recognise that staff are often stretched to the limit; untenable workloads due to lack of staffing and poor skills mixes deter recruitment and retention of workers and hinder the ability of staff to cope with incidents beyond 'standard routines'.
- Community members feel that current processes for accreditation inspections are insufficient for ensuring that providers are providing safe, quality care to residents.
- Community members feel that improving staffing levels, skills mix, and the training/education of workers are urgently required to improve aged care services.
- Profit should not be the priority in aged care; greater accountability for the delivery and use of aged care funding by providers and governments is vital to ensure safe, quality care for residents.



Executive Summary

Introduction

This companion report accompanies the 2019 National Aged Care Survey Report by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) and focusses upon results provided by community member participants. The 2019 National Aged Care Survey followed up on the previous 2016 National Aged Care Survey of staff and community members and identified and examined key contemporary issues regarding participants' concerns and experiences with the Australian aged care system.

Background

In 2016, the ANMF undertook its first national aged care survey with almost two and a half thousand participants. This initial survey was undertaken after more than a decade of ANMF campaigns calling for improvements in aged care to both increase and ensure safe, quality care for recipients of care and satisfactory working conditions for aged care staff.

Aged care in Australia has been in the spotlight and a key issue for the ANMF for many years, the ANMF has drawn attention to the shortcomings in the system, highlighting to governments, regulatory bodies, key stakeholders, the media, and the community critical issues related to the quality of care delivery.

In early 2018, the ANMF launched a new national campaign for safe staffing in aged care *Ratios for aged care, make them law NOW*. In September 2018, following an expose on residential aged care by the ABC's Four Corners program, the Prime Minister announced the establishment of a Royal Commission into aged care quality and safety with a final report due by 30 April 2020.

This companion report presents the results of the 2019 ANMF national aged care survey which was made available to community members shortly after the first Commission hearings. This report focusses largely upon responses provided by community member participants in 2019 and provides comparative results with the 2016 results where relevant.

Methods

The survey was open to prospective participants in all Australian States and Territories from 26 March to 12 April 2019. Two separate Survey Monkey® forms were used; one for aged care staff and one for community member participants. The community member survey incorporated 15 questions including a mix of demographic items, multiple choice items, yes/no items, and free-text questions. Largely, the survey replicated that which was used by the ANMF in the 2016 national aged care survey, with some modifications made to questions and response options to update the survey regarding the contemporary context.

The data collected from respondents was analysed using simple descriptive statistics and frequency counts as well as a process of general inductive qualitative analysis for qualitative data provided by respondents in open-ended or free-text fields.



Results

Overall, 354 community members from all States and Territories answered at least one survey question. Most participants were relatives of aged care residents (n = 229/ 66%), with 90 (26%) identifying as 'other'. Most of these people were also relatives of residents in aged care, but also identified themselves as simultaneously working or having worked in aged care themselves.

Key Concerns

At almost 93% (n = 327) having 'adequate staffing levels for meeting basic care needs' for residents was the greatest concern among participants. This was closely followed by 'adequate staffing levels for providing high care' (87.8%/ n = 311). 'Levels of experience and qualifications held by nursing staff' (n = 254/ 71.7%) and 'dementia management' (n = 209/ 59%) were concerns for many participants. There was considerable consistency between concerns identified in 2016 and 2019. Major themes emerged regarding concerns with aged care and related to 'providers and facilities', 'concerns with staff', 'residents' care', and 'integration and links with allied, acute, and mental health'.

Funding

Almost 93% (n= 319) of participants felt that funding for aged care in Australia is inadequate in 2019. While this appeared to be slightly lower than in 2016, where 96% felt that funding was inadequate, qualitative analysis of open-ended feedback revealed that participants felt that funding does not meet residents' care needs due to lack of transparency and accountability for funding, and an inappropriate funding model. Analysis of in-depth responses revealed four major themes;

- 'Aged care funding is insufficient to provide adequate staffing levels and skills mixes to meet residents' needs'
- 'Inadequate staffing numbers with insufficient time to address residents' needs especially dementia, mental health, clinical assessment, toileting, and time for social interaction'
- 'Aged care provider business models prioritise profit over providing safe, quality care'
- 'Lack of transparency and accountability of providers means that current aged care funding may be adequate, but is not being spent on safe, quality care for residents'
- 'Lack of funding and/or accountability for funding has flow-on effects upon the provision of adequate health assessment, food, hygiene, and social activities for residents'

Staffing and Skill mix

In 2019, 94% of participants (n = 239) indicated that staff ratios were inadequate, a 10% increase from the 2016 results (84.9%). Two main themes arose from participants' responses; 'too few staff to take care of residents' needs' and 'community members understand workforce pressures'.

In 2019, 86.5% (n = 218) observed that the ratio of registered nurses to other staff members was inadequate at their facility; an increase from the 84.9% (n = 360). Themes regarding 'registered nurse to other staff ratios' and 'registered nurse to resident ratios' emerged. These highlighted the effects inadequate ratios of registered nurses have on care delivery and residents.



Cost Shifting

Cost shifting from residential aged care facilities to residents and their family was less frequently noted by aged care staff in 2019 in comparison to 2016, however 26% (n = 61) of participants identified that residents/family members are being asked to pay for items that facilities once provided.

Improving Aged Care Services

Legislated minimum staffing levels was the most commonly identified factor by participants (89.2% / n = 315) that could be implemented to improve aged care services. Participants also identified less focus on profits for providers and more on minimum standard for residents (n = 309 / 87.5%) and greater government funding for staffing (n = 291 / 82.4%) as key actions. The actions identified from the responses offered by these participants provide suggested solutions to the problems and concerns that have been identified throughout this survey and encapsulated the fundamental responses needed from government and industry.

Voting Intentions

In 2019, 30% of participants indicated that if a political party made a major announcement to legislate for minimum staffing levels and skills mix to improve services and care to residents in aged care, they would vote to support them, just under 4% down from in 2016.

Concluding comments

Two hundred and seven participants provided concluding free-text comments or stories. Four key themes emerged which echoed participants' responses throughout the survey and encapsulated their overarching concerns with aged care and the causes of failings of the system. The themes were identified as; 'a sector in urgent need of improvement', 'a workforce at breaking point', 'lack of respect and value for residents', and 'deficient clinical and individualised care due to lack of time'.

Discussion

This report provides an updated picture of Australian community members' views and perspectives of the situation in the aged care sector with a focus on their concerns, staffing, funding, and ideas around what needs to be done to improve the sector. Participants from every State and Territory contributed their stories and experiences, which often echoed and confirmed those offered by aged care staff members in the associated report (ANMF, 2019). Many participants identified themselves as both relatives of aged care residents and as staff members at aged care facilities. The dual perspectives of these participants are valuable as they were able to observe and reflect on the sector with the insight of staff and as consumers.

As with the ANMF's 2019 National Aged Care Survey of staff members (ANMF, 2019), the data provided by community members presents a bleak picture of aged care in Australia. Community members also describe ongoing systemic failure to ensure safe and quality care to aged care residents and suggest an abrogation of duty by governments and providers. Disappointingly, the results and experiences presented and described by community members appears largely unchanged from those presented in the ANMF's 2016 Survey (ANMF 2016).



As with staff members, community members participants described a situation of widespread substandard care which offered neither dignity to the elderly at the end of their lives, nor to those who enter residential aged care facilities at younger ages. Community members similarly describe a situation that has failed to recognise the contribution the elderly have made to Australian society by providing them with dignified care at the end of their lives and which, participants believed, represented a profound lack of respect for Australia's elderly.

The results from the 2019 survey identify that community members have become increasingly concerned with deficiencies in terms of the numbers and skills mixes of staff. While funding appeared to be slightly less of a concern to participants than in 2016, the qualitative data revealed that many participants feel that while there is a sufficient amount of funding, improved transparency and accountability on the part of providers is essential to ensuring that both government subsidies and consumer contributions are used where it matters most – for the provision of safe, quality care for residents.

A most notable change between the 2016 results and the 2019 results is that the state of aged care appears to have declined. In 2016, participants described the situation in aged care as one approaching despair; in 2019 it is one in despair. While the survey of staff members highlighted that the staff members themselves are experiencing that despair first hand, the results of this survey reveal – unsurprisingly – that the residents and relatives are also victims of Australia's failing aged care system.

Survey participants in 2019 remain critically concerned about what they observe to be a widespread lack of regard and respect that the aged care system has for the elderly, the lack of consideration that the sector has for the individual needs of residents and need for communication and involvement of family members has intensified. Participants also articulated the failings of the system, i.e. management, providers and government, more directly and frankly than in 2016. This feature was also noted regarding the data provided by staff member participants. Community members provided considerable and distressing detail regarding instances where insufficient staffing (both lack of staff in general and lack of suitably qualified/trained staff) led to substandard care, injury, illness, health decline, and death.

Responses provided by community members notably included very few examples where blame was levelled at a specific staff member or staff members. Where instances of poor care were explained, community members tended to appear to present the situation as one that was largely driven by factors such as lack of time due to the absence of sufficient staff, insufficient training or expertise among staff, recruitment of individuals who are not suited or able to effectively work in the sector, or due to the provider's broader policies or attitudes to the provision of care for residents. This could indicate that community members recognise that many of the failings in Australia's aged care sector are systemic and often beyond the control of the individual staff members working within it. Considering the qualitative evidence provided by participants, aged care staff are seen to be worked off their feet due to lack of numbers, hampered by the presence of too few staff with sufficient expertise and training (such as registered nurses), rushing to deliver care to far too many residents, and burned out and unable to provide the most sensitive and compassionate care by fact that the situation has not improved and may have indeed worsened.



Aged care providers by contrast are depicted as profiteers with little regard for the wellbeing, safety, and comfort of residents. Many participants expressed frustration and even anger that increasingly, aged care in Australia is coming to be dominated by for-profit organisations. Participants feel that caring for elders and the younger residents in aged care homes is a social service that should not be driven by greed or profits and that seeing it as such contravenes the basic purpose of aged care; to provide safe, quality care to Australia's most vulnerable groups. This analysis is sustained by participants' views and perspectives regarding accreditation and inspections. Many participants felt that these must be more rigorous and thorough, noting that it appears currently that providers are given too much warning to temporarily increase staff and care quality to simply give the appearance of delivering good quality care. It appears that community members see aged care providers as often attempting to cut corners, shirk responsibility, and get away with providing the bare minimum of care due to a reckless and unjustifiable prioritisation of profits over people.

As with the results submitted by aged care staff members, a primary focus of community members appears to have been upon the negative impacts – on both residents, staff, and often themselves as relative – of not having enough staff or an appropriate skills mix. These views persisted in participants' suggestions regarding what could be done to improve aged care services.

Conclusion

As with the 2016 survey, it appeared that aged care staff and community members shared many similar perspectives and experiences regarding Australia's aged care sector. The themes and conclusions developed from the results provided by participants of the community member survey were developed and analysed separately from those provided by aged care staff members, however the sentiments and key messages here echo very closely those that were so apparent in the staff member survey (ANMF, 2019).

The final four themes developed from community member participants concluding comments and stories sum up their overall perspectives. Aged care in Australia is a sector in urgent need of improvement. This was known in 2016 and revealed by the ANMF's National Aged Care Survey then, so it is regretful that little appears to have changed in the intervening years. Community members understand that the aged care workforce is at breaking point; there are simply too few staff and not enough with the skills and qualifications to provide an acceptable standard of care to many residents. Community members appear to understand that most people working in aged care want to do their jobs well and provide residents with safe, compassionate, and quality care but may not be able to do this due largely to lack of time, provider pressures, and understaffing. Community members observe a widespread absence of respect and value for residents encapsulated in providers' perceived focus on profits and cost savings through staffing cuts in the presence of dehumanising and substandard conditions as well as in successive Governments' inaction.

Community members want their loved ones in residential aged care to be provided with safe, dignified, and respectful care at the end of their lives. As one participant commented; *"I am grateful that you are endeavoring to create better conditions, and hopeful that people at a vulnerable stage of life are treated with much more humanity and dignity."*



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The survey's participants believe this will require:

- Ensuring that care is the priority for the entire aged care system;
- Guaranteeing transparency in the use of tax payer funding, and ensuring it is tied to care provision;
- Ensuring genuine accountability of aged care management and providers as well as government for the quality of the aged care system; and,
- Ensuring the voices of aged care residents, relatives, and staff are heard.

Community members are calling for urgent action to be taken to fix the failing aged care sector in Australia and have added their voices to those of almost 3,000 staff members. As another participant lamented;

"In a modern, progressive society like Australia we should feel ashamed if we don't address the problem by changing by law the resident:staff ratio in aged care facilities.

I am ashamed to be an Australian; to think we live in a society that thinks so little of our Aged population that we can't even look after them properly. Not because we don't know how, but because we don't want to spend the money. Putting the profits before the welfare of elderly citizens is shameful."

For sake of elderly Australians and their relatives, and the staff who work in and with aged care, the system must respond.

"My nan had some beautiful and caring nurses looking after her for her daily needs, but there just weren't enough of them... She and many others deserve so much more for the final years of their lives."

- Granddaughter

