

The Royal Commission's first witness hearing held in Adelaide over the past two weeks was aimed at identifying the key issues and concerns about the aged care system that would need its attention.

In closing the hearing, Timothy McEvoy, Counsel Assisting the Commission, summarised the wide-reaching issues that have been raised, and the systemic failures which are impacting Australia's Aged Care system.

Mr McEvoy pointed to Mr Gerard Hayes' (National President of the Health Services Union) view that there needs to be a fundamental shift in how this country cares for older Australians. Mr Hayes told the Commission that the contribution made by older Australians to this country is undervalued. These children of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s who rebuilt Australia after the depression and the Second World War, are all too often seen as a burden. They are not receiving the quality and choice of care nor the dignity they deserve.

Instead, the Commission heard, the system is complex and difficult to navigate, is plagued by a lack of funding and resources, and is staffed by a workforce which is overworked, underpaid and under-qualified. With predictions that an additional 80,000 people will need care by 2050 requiring the workforce to triple, the need for sustainable funding will be crucial.

Mr McEvoy recounted the difficulty faced by families and care recipients trying to understand how the many layers of the Aged Care system works. In addition, the Commission heard inadequate funding has meant that families and care recipients are sometimes waiting for years to access adequate home care services so that they can stay in their homes rather than enter residential care. The result is that some older Australians have no choice but to enter residential care while they wait to receive home care.

Several important concerns were raised about residential care including the overuse of psychotropic drugs such as antidepressants and sedatives, and alarmingly, the use of physical and chemical restraints used as the first resort to treat dementia-related behaviours. The Commission also heard about problems retaining nursing staff, the lack of adequately trained staff, and the difficulties faced by GPs treating patients in the residential care setting.

There were also calls to regulate the carer workforce, including requiring a minimum level of training and establishing a national register of workers to prevent abusers from simply moving between homes or between States.

As Counsel-Assisting Peter Gray pointed out, numerous inquiries over recent decades have resulted in ad hoc reforms to the Aged Care system, with problems addressed in isolation. It is clear after this first hearing at the Royal Commission that there are many issues impacting the quality and safety of our Aged Care system and what is needed is a wholistic approach to fixing it. Hopes are pinned on the Commission's ability to tease out the issues and provide a framework for real, effective and lasting change.

The next phase of the Commission will see community forums in a number of metropolitan and regional locations around the country. The Commission wants to hear from the community about their experiences of and ideas about aged care. The first forums will be held in Bankstown in Sydney and in Bendigo on the 1st and 5th of March. Audio and video recording and photography have been banned from the forums, and the Commission has asked that any media attending do not quote directly or identify members of the public who speak. Clearly the Commission is encouraging people to speak freely about their experiences.

Information about these forums can be found here:

<https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/Engagement/Pages/community-forums.aspx>

The Commission has published its first paper which is intended to provide a general overview and some background information relevant to issues that it intends to cover during the Commission.

Called Navigating The Maze: An Overview Of Australia's Current Aged Care System, you can view it here: <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/Pages/default.aspx>

To discuss any of the above, please feel free to contact Kate Simpson of our office on (02) 6772 4899 or via email to ksimpson@moin.com.au