

Acknowledge the challenges, but focus on the opportunities

WITH THE aged care royal commission's final report looming, this is the time when Australia must lay strong foundations for a nation where we can age with confidence – where we feel safe and respected and supported to continue to live our lives to the full.

What we do as a sector between now and the May Budget and beyond will have huge impacts for older Australians and the people and organisations who care for and support them.

We must be prepared for the start of the biggest transformation of our aged care system ever, while COVID-19 continues to be a devastating health and economic crisis.

Before the pandemic, aged care was already facing increasing challenges with threats to the viability and sustainability of the care that older Australians want, need and deserve.

Research shows that community perceptions

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about aged care services remain predominantly negative, which is a challenge we must resolve.

To this end, I believe the narrative about aged care and the community's perception will only change when the sector changes.

The royal commission is holding a mirror up to our nation and our sector, about the value we place on our elders and how we care for and support them when they need it.

At the same time, aged care and our society cannot allow governments to dictate what quality is. This is our



Sean Rooney, CEO of Leading Age Services Australia

time to start thinking and doing things differently.

We have to emphasise that we are about care and highlight the importance of our sector to the nation.

We need to be defined by the meaningful and measurable differences we make in people's lives.

That is why we have to change, we have to re-shape and re-imagine the story of care.

We must be more assertive, expansive and collaborative in working to realise a better system.

This approach sees us shift our focus to working together to explain to the community why we matter and the value we bring to our country.

By improving Australia's understanding of this, we will be better placed to hold decision-makers to account to deliver the aged care system that meets the needs of older Australians.

Our commitment to realise a new system must be backed up with all means necessary including funding and processes, along with the right responsibilities and decision-making across all levels of government, aged services, families, community groups, towns, suburbs and regional areas.

Our sector needs to embrace this and acknowledge the challenges, but equally focus on the amazing opportunities. ■

Reflecting on COVID and longer-term aged care reform

THE CLOSE of 2020 brings with it a sense of hope as the unprecedented crisis situation faced by the aged care sector in Australia wanes and an effective COVID-19 vaccination becomes a reality.

For many frontline and clinical staff however, the tragic consequences of the virus, combined with the moral distress caused by having to make forced decisions about acceptable standards of care and resource allocation, will linger.

For older people themselves, living at home or in residential care, the aftermath will be felt into 2021 and beyond as the most vulnerable endure isolation that has had and continues to have a significant effect on their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

One direct response to COVID the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission identified in its interim strategy report



Associate Professor Marguerite Bramble, president of the AAG

submitted to the Royal Commission in September 2020 was to provide increased access for older people to relevant allied health and mental health professionals and ensure accredited infection control bodies were deployed to aged care homes to assist staff.

What has emerged very clearly from these responses is that equal access not only

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to the health system, but also to health protection, is a fundamental right of all Australians young or old and regardless of where they live.

Ongoing decisions and responses should be informed by relevant public health considerations, such as the 'precautionary principle' and the 'population-focused principle' in the context of aged care reform and the principles of primary health care.

Overall the closer collaborations between the Australian Department of Health, state governments and the commission have shown that in the year ahead there is the opportunity to ensure the experiences of and response to COVID more directly to inform long-term aged care reform both at the strategic and operational level.

Well beyond the impacts of the pandemic, longer-term reform must be based on legislation designed with an explicit attention to advance a rights-based approach.

This must be integrated with concepts of enhancing and enabling individually defined quality of life and end of life decisions through multidisciplinary and family-centred models of care. ■

