



03 Oct 2018

Mount Barker Courier, Mount Barker SA

Author: Elisa Rose • Section: General News • Article Type: News Item • Audience : 8,424  
Page: 7 • Printed size: 572.00cm<sup>2</sup> • Region: SA • Market: Australia • ASR: AUD 2,292  
words: 711 • Item ID: 1017193675

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# What makes a good home

By Elisa Rose

In the wake of the national aged care crisis, there are key things families should look for in an aged care home, a leading seniors advocate believes.

The aged care industry came under scrutiny recently as ABC-TV's *Four Corners* program revealed secretly filmed footage of abuse occurring in aged care homes around Australia.

But National Seniors chief advocate Ian Henschke says there are ways families can make informed decisions when choosing an aged care home.

He recommends that families ask to make unannounced visits at a prospective home to allow them to see the environment on a day to day basis, while at some homes, short-term stays are also possible during the decision-making period.

Things to pay attention to during those visits include the kind of meals served, the interaction between staff and residents and the daily activities on offer for residents, he said.

"An aged care home should be a home away from home and it should try to be as good as that home," he said.

"What activities they have in the home, do they go on outings, do they have pets, are they allowed to go into the garden?"

"You've got to remember that these are people at the end of their lives and the things that bring them joy are their surroundings, social activities, other people's company and food."

Earlier this year, the Federal Government introduced unannounced quality and safety checks as part of its aged care reforms, meaning homes will no longer have advance warning about upcoming audits. Current and past sanctions and non-compliance issues found in aged care homes are publicly available on the Government's My Aged Care website, which Mr Henschke said should be used as a resource when looking for an aged care home.

Speaking with other relatives, residents and staff about their experiences were also good ways to find out about the kind of care offered at a home, he said.

He believes staffing ratios are important in decision making and has welcomed a Bill put forward by Mayo MP Rebekha Sharkie, which would force aged care homes to publish their staffing ratios online.

Registered nurse and independent nurse advisor Peter Vincent was instrumental in developing the Bill and he said he supported mandatory staffing ratios in aged care facilities, but that they should be flexible depending on the care needs of residents.

"We operate on a base value of one registered nurse for every 60 residents, one enrolled nurse for every 30 residents and one care staff member for every six residents in the mornings," he said.

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However, those ratios could decrease at less busy times of the day, he said, but should increase if the home had residents with special needs.

Other support staff, including specialised nurses and lifestyle staff were also important, he said.

The owner of Woodside's Onkaparinga Valley Residential Care, Valerie Elliott, said she believed the severe issues raised by *Four Corners* were isolated within the industry, but has welcomed the Royal Commission and Ms Sharkie's staffing ratios Bill, saying she would support a "benchmark" for the industry.

On a typical morning shift, OVRC employs a carer for every four or five residents, as well as an enrolled nurse for every 20 residents.

It is also staffed with a registered nurse 24 hours a day in a supervisory role, several



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registered nurses in management roles on weekdays and lifestyle staff who co-ordinate recreation activities.

However, while Ms Elliott is confident in her facility's staffing levels, she said she would like to see more funding across the industry for more enrolled and registered nurses and believed the issues seen in some aged care homes stemmed from more than inappropriately low staffing levels.

"The carers, I believe, don't get enough education," she said.

"I'd like to see much more thorough follow-up by the trainers."

Mr Henschke said that while there were some "wonderful" carers in the industry, more work needed to be done to ensure that carers were in the industry for the right reasons and more dementia training should be incorporated in their education.

### Questions to ask:

What is the staff to resident ratio?

**How many clinical management staff are there?**

Are there extra staff provided for residents with extra needs?

**Is there a registered nurse rostered on at all times?**

Are there lifestyle staff rostered on every day?

**Does the home have any current or past sanctions or compliance issues?**

How do staff interact with residents?

**What is the feedback from other residents and families?**

What kind of food is served?

**Is hot food served on weekends?**

Are there regular recreation activities available for residents to participate in?

**Does the facility offer outings or day trips?**

Are there pets or accessible outdoor garden areas?



*LEFT:  
Onkaparinga Valley  
Residential Care  
clinical nurse manager  
Kylie Rumsey, left,  
and proprietor Valerie  
Elliott have welcomed  
greater scrutiny of the  
aged care industry.*