

Federal Election 2016: Aged care

Who we are:

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 9,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work and have a strong voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact upon the quality of life of all Australians.

Social workers are integral to services that cater for the health and wellbeing of older Australians in all settings across the aged care continuum including government, non-government organisations, hospitals, health settings, and private practice.

Main points:

- Older Australians need to have access to skilled and knowledgeable professionals who can provide support in relation to their psychosocial needs, including relationship, family, grief and loss and mental health issues.
- A more comprehensive approach is needed in order to identify and care for those older Australians with complex needs that include psychosocial issues. Enhanced psychosocial assessments and the resultant appropriate supports will not only improve the quality of life of older people, but also that of their families and reduce work pressures on care staff.
- Currently there is a lack of services able to intervene in complex situations where abuse is occurring.
- The loss and grief associated with the transition into aged care and dementia is not adequately assessed or supported by the existing aged care workforce.
- The aged care sector requires better integration of professional social work services to ensure psychosocial needs are addressed.

Discussion:

The current composition of the aged care workforce at all levels does not adequately provide services that consider the full range of psychosocial needs of older Australians. There is significant research and literature demonstrating the importance of addressing the mental health needs of aged care residents as they have a direct impact on all other aspects of their physical and emotional wellbeing,¹ including care needs. Comprehensive enhanced assessments and supports will not only improve the quality of life of residents, but also that of their families and reduce work pressures on care staff. Improving the skills of the aged care workforce is essential to address issues related to the increased longevity of Australia's ageing population.

Furthermore, the loss and grief of older persons and their families associated with the transition into aged care services and dementia is not adequately assessed or supported by the existing aged care workforce. This is a highly complex area where individuals and their families are grieving the loss of independence, family and identity that significantly impacts adjusting, coping and wellbeing. The aged care workforce needs access to training to adequately identify and address the range of issues experienced by older people and their families, for example the significant mental health and grief and loss issues. Greater emphasis on a comprehensive approach to service delivery and education and training of direct service staff is an important factor in meeting the future challenges of the sector. The current workforce is hampered and undermined by a lack of service integration leading to poorer outcomes for consumers. Older people with complex needs greatly benefit from coordinated interventions from appropriate agencies and workers.

Ultimately, the AASW believes that greater inclusion is needed of appropriately trained professionals who are able to provide support in relation to the complex needs of older Australians.

¹ AIHW 2013. Depression in residential aged care 2008-2012. *Aged care statistics series* no. 39. Cat. no. AGE 73. Canberra: AIHW