

8 November 2019

Dear Colleagues

### **Respect: the antidote to neglect**

After nine months of public hearings, submissions, forums, research and visits, the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety commissioners Lynelle Briggs AO and the late Honourable Richard Tracey AM RFD QC selected just one word to title their interim report: Neglect. There is no escaping the impact of the word, no room for interpretation. It communicates just one thing: the systemic and societal neglect of our elderly.

We must draw the line here. Australia can and must do better to care for older people, who have, as the interim report says, 'earned the chance to enjoy their later years, after many decades of contribution and hard work'. I have written previously that the Royal Commission is a generational opportunity to decide, as a community, what we want and need from aged care now and into the future. The interim report, and the final report due November 2020, must be a platform for real and meaningful change.

While we do not know what form that change will take, Mercy Health is not inclined to sit and wait. The interim report does urge action on three issues – home care waiting lists, chemical restraint and younger people in aged care – while warning against merely 'patching up' a system in need of wholesale reform. It is a real concern that a flurry of activity on the surface could in fact allow the core problem of systemic and societal neglect to go unaddressed. While Mercy Health is not immune to failure, we do have strong views about what good care looks and feels like and how the sector can respond compassionately to the needs of an ageing population.

At the heart of the issue is respect. We cannot claim to respect older people in a society that, as the interim report calls out, speaks of them in terms of "burden, encumbrance, [and] obligation". It speaks volumes that media coverage of this Royal Commission has been minimal compared to its recent banking equivalent, as reported by the ABC. Our society must ask ourselves why it is that older people are worth less of our time, less of our respect. Have we forgotten that their frail hands are the same strong hands that built our towns and cities; the same purposeful hands whose inventions continue to keep us healthy, safe and mobile; the same gentle hands that raised and loved us?

Mercy Health is committed to providing compassionate and respectful care for the elderly people in our care in their own homes and in our 35 residential aged care homes. We also advocate on behalf of all elderly and vulnerable Australians, backed by our founding Catholic beliefs that all people have inherent dignity and are worthy of love and respect. That is why we are appealing to the Australian Government and the community to commit to reforming a system that is simply not coping. Immediate changes should include reinstating the increase to the residential aged care subsidy that carried the sector through the first few months of

this year, until such time as a full and comprehensive review of the system has occurred. Funding is admittedly just one contributing factor among the many issues outlined by the Royal Commission, but it cannot wait another 12 months.

Meanwhile, Mercy Health will continue to lead the way in introducing a new approach to aged care, with people living in smaller households supported by staff whose rosters enable them to establish respectful relationships with residents and their communities. We will continue to listen, learn and innovate as the Royal Commission resumes.

Yours sincerely

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