

Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland

Submission No:	58
Submitted by:	Carers Queensland
Publication:	Making the submission and your name public
Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	

SUBMISSION

Inquiry into Elder Abuse Queensland

Submission Title:	Inquiry into Elder Abuse Queensland
Date:	8 April 2025
Author:	Louise Harris Senior Quality, Policy, and Research Officer [REDACTED]
Approved by:	Jim Toohey Managing Director Carers Queensland Ltd. Level 1, 120 Chalk Street Lutwyche, Queensland 4030 Phone: (07) 3900 8100 Website: www.carersqld.com.au ABN: 20 061 257 725 © Carers Queensland Ltd. 2024

CARERS QUEENSLAND

Carers Queensland is the peak body representing the diverse concerns, needs and interests of carers and caring families in Queensland. Carers Queensland believes that all carers regardless of their age, disability, gender or gender expression, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, geographical location, or their cultural and linguistic differences should have the same rights, choices and opportunities and be able to enjoy optimum health, social and economic wellbeing and participate in family and community life, employment, and education like other citizens. Carers Queensland's mission is to improve the quality of life of all carers throughout Queensland.

The activity and impact of providing care is best understood in terms of its context; as a relationship between two or more individuals, rooted in family, friendship, or community. Caring is a role rarely chosen by most, nor does it discriminate. Children and young people, people of working age and older people, people with disability, people who identify as culturally and linguistically diverse, First Nations Australians, people with diverse bodies, genders, relationships, and sexualities and those living in rural and remote Queensland provide care to family members or friends daily. For some caring is a short-term commitment while for others, it is a role that literally lasts a lifetime.

Family and friend carers provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends who have a disability, mental illness, chronic medical condition, terminal illness or are frail aged. Carers come from all walks of life.

We aspire to provide an independent platform from which to advance the issues and concerns of the 642,200 carers in Queensland and believe our knowledge and expertise in carer issues means we can provide the Government with relevant and trusted information that will ensure that the needs of carers will be recognised, respected, and acted on.

Our submission is informed by national and international peer reviewed data, our own experience as a service provider and the personal and often difficult admissions of carers, those people who provide unpaid care and support.

Introduction

Carers Queensland would like to thank the government for the opportunity to comment on elder abuse in Queensland. We believe this is an important, complex issue which has remained hidden and undiscussed for too long. We would like to provide the following discussion points to be raised in conversation surrounding elder abuse.

Discussion

Awareness and Recognition of Abuse

Elder abuse is a complex, often misunderstood issue within society, including surprisingly low levels of recognition amongst professionals and wider society. We believe a clear public information campaign alongside facilitated community wide conversations about elder abuse, risk factors, types of abuse and people who cause harm is necessary in Queensland. By building public knowledge and facilitating open discussions about abuse, older people can feel confident to seek help when needed and lay the groundwork for a more understanding and safer Queensland. There should be more publicly available information and awareness about the range of abuse, people who cause harm and the options available to older people who have/are being abused. Currently, there is an underlying widespread belief that people who are experiencing abuse or mistreatment, need to end contact and/or leave their home to stop the abuse. The reality is that there are a multitude of complex social and financial reasons why an individual cannot leave or end contact with the person who is causing harm, which is often the case for carers. In our experience, the community needs a wider appreciation on this issue. An educational campaign that engages and empowers people to take control of their own lives will be an effective method to assist those experiencing abuse and harm.

Media campaigns and educational resources about the abuse of older people have traditionally focussed on a younger carer engaging in abusive or neglectful behaviour towards an older person. While we acknowledge this is often the case, it is not fully representative of the whole spectrum of elder abuse. In understanding the breadth of abuse occurring for older people, Carers Queensland advocate for targeted education to increase awareness generally and professionals specifically highlighting the range of situations where abuse can occur. For example, between residents in an aged facility, between older aged spouses, adult children or grandchildren with disability engaging in emotionally or physically abusive or exploitative behaviours. By failing to fully represent the extent of abuse and mistreatment experienced by older people, this diminishes the voices of those affected and risks placing blame on those individuals whose experiences differ from the societal expectations of abuse and harm.

It is also important to highlight the development of effective media campaigns in raising awareness of the mistreatment of carers is challenging, because many individuals do not identify as 'carers,' viewing their role as a natural duty or responsibility to a loved one. This lack of self-identification leads to an underestimation of the extent of harm experienced and hinders efforts to address these issues effectively. Without a clear, shared understanding of what it means to be a carer awareness campaigns risk missing their target audience and failing to capture the full scope of the problem.

Recommendation 1:

Review media campaigns and educational initiatives to ensure they highlight the diverse forms of elder abuse in Australia. This will support greater awareness among the public and professionals, reduce

the stigma surrounding abuse and shift the narrative away from the harmful stereotype that equates all carers with abusers.

Recommendation 2:

Establish an efficacy benchmark all public awareness and media campaigns to ensure these are effectively achieving their intended outcomes and driving meaningful change.

Domestic and Family Violence and Abuse

Older person carers are an unseen and often forgotten cohort who are particularly vulnerable to experiencing abuse, particularly from the people they care for. The emotional complexity of caring for a loved one, combined with societal perceptions of carers, often leads them to withhold information from professionals and support networks. This contributes to abuse remaining a hidden and unaddressed aspect of their caregiving role.

As individuals age, they become prone to certain conditions which alter a person's brain, capacity and behaviour. Conditions such as dementia have been shown to produce violent, aggressive and manipulative behaviours¹ in some people. These behaviours are not the fault of the person but rather a result of their condition, and not something they are able to control. This places the caregiver, frequently their aged spouse, at significant risk of abuse. Research studies have highlighted that over a third of carers of people with dementia have been subjected to abusive behaviours². Evidently, this puts the older person providing care at substantial risk, which is unseen and unrecognized, ensuring that these carers have very little avenues of support available to them throughout these ongoing traumatic experiences.

Furthermore, older people who provide care for adult children or grandchildren with disability, mental ill health or addiction disorders are also at substantial risk of abuse and mistreatment. During a recent consultation Carers Queensland hosted, we heard from many older carers who are experiencing emotional and physical abuse from the adult child they provide care for. One story which illustrates this issue is from a woman living in a remote area of Queensland who shared her experience of caring for her adult daughter, who lives with mental ill health, including depression, anxiety, and episodes of psychosis. She and her husband have been her primary carers since their daughter was a young teenager; she is now in her thirties. During episodes of psychosis, their daughter can become violent towards them. Despite the risk, they do not contact the police due to concerns about the lack of understanding emergency services have regarding mental health and the complexities of the caring relationship, as well as fear of potential consequences for their daughter. Instead, they have developed their own coping strategy—locking themselves in a separate room until the episode subsides. This family has not received any support or assistance to develop safe and effective measures to manage these situations. Unfortunately, their experience is not unique but reflects the reality faced by many families in similar circumstances.

The abuse of older carers within the care relationship remains a low visibility issue. While data is collected on domestic and family violence, it is not disaggregated to identify cases where the victim is also the caregiver to the person causing harm. As a result, the true extent of this issue in Australia is

¹ Cerejeira J, Lagarto L, Mukaetova-Ladinska EB. Behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia. *Front Neurol*. 2012

² C Cooper, A Selwood, M Blanchard, et al. Abusive behaviour experienced by family carers from people with dementia: the CARD (caring for relatives with dementia) study. *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry*. 2010

unknown. To effectively address the abuse of older people, it is essential to conduct further research and improve data collection and analysis. This will help to fully understand the issue, inform support strategies, and ensure responses are delivered in a trauma informed manner.

Recommendation 3:

Academic research to fund better determine the prevalence and the risk of abuse to older carers and how to best support them to be safe while enabling them to continue their caring role. In addition to this, better data to be captured and analysed in order to enhance our understanding of how prevalent this type of abuse is.