

## **Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland**

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Elder Abuse

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From Sheena Cunningham [REDACTED]

Date Tue 25/03/2025 3:35 PM

To [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Dear Minister The Honourable Ann Leahy MP,

I would like to bring to your attention an incident that has happened in your Electorate. My reasoning being utter frustration and distress at the inadequate response to Elder Abuse in Queensland. I recently found out that there is an inquiry into Elder Abuse as announced in the press late last year. It is only now, following the death of my Mother-in-Law in Dalby and my Father in Cairns that I can even begin to describe what has happened. I will not go into great detail because it is probably not your portfolio. I have copied in the office of the relevant Minister that is chairing the enquiry.

Some background to put this in context. I am 62 years old and a Registered Nurse, my Husband is a Doctor and worked for RFDS for almost 30 years. We live in Cairns. My Father has been a Widower for over 30 years, he passed away peacefully in an Aged Care home here on 11<sup>th</sup> February. He had a wonderful full life, lived independently until he was 91 and then moved to a nursing home. We would visit almost daily, take him out and essentially it was the best possible experience for him and our family.

My Mother-in-law passed away in her sleep in an Aged Care home in Dalby on 23rd January after a long illness. She was born and brought up in Dalby, married a young man from Dalby and had four sons. Her husband was a solicitor before deciding to buy a farm on the outskirts of Dalby. They were incredibly hard working and quite successful on the farm. My Father-in-Law passed away in 2011 leaving his wife and one son on the farm. Their oldest son had died some years before and another son was living in care in Toowoomba with a long-term psychiatric illness.

As the years went on, my Mother-in-law became physically frail but mentally very alert. The son on the farm was reclusive and had not left the farm for many years.

A few years after the Father died, a second cousin and his wife began to do paid labouring on the farm. We visited as often as possible but were unable to physically assist. My Mother-in-Law loved cattle and bread Herefords from prime bulls she purchased from a local breeder. Her eyesight deteriorated and she was unable to drive so started relying on the cousins wife to take her to town to shop. They would call us for approval to undertake work on the farm. Matters slowly but surely escalated. I have timelines, dates, emails and texts which were later provided to the Queensland Police Service. We built them a 5 bedroom house on the property so they could be near my in-laws.

Despite visiting and speaking to my Mother-in-Law on the phone, in December 2022 she became gravely ill, hospitalised in Toowoomba and moved to an Aged Care facility in Dalby. For approximately another year, they supposedly cared for the Son left on the farm. We had to evict the family from the home as we had realised what had been happening. During this time I contacted the Elder Abuse Hotline which was manned by the Uniting Church. This was quite unhelpful. We reported the Elder Abuse to the QPS Rural and Stock Crime Squad as they were already involved with the theft of cattle from our property and rebranding our calves with their brand by the family who we evicted. I am now going to list just some of the problems we reported.



Depriving her of her handbag, bank books and the ability to get funds without the Wife taking her to the bank, restricting the amount of food available to the Mother and Son, passing herself off as me and accessing private health information, trying to have her diagnosed with dementia when she was mentally competent, selling her Prime Bull and telling her he had died, selling or butchering up to 200 head of cattle without her consent, Gas Lighting her about us, close friends, the Cattle and where they were, lying to us about her condition, extorting large sums of money from her to feed her son when we were already paying for his care, visiting her at the Nursing Home to bully her after receiving legal correspondence to not contact her, phoning and harassing her, wrongly saying she had promised them a "share of the farm" to look after her son and finally digging up sections of gravel and selling to a third party without our knowledge.

The care she received at the Nursing Home was so good that she was unrecognisable, put on weight, joined activities, had fun and looked 10 years younger. Sadly, we had to invoke the mental health act and the son was involuntarily admitted to hospital in Toowoomba. He was so scared and unwell from being left in the care of this couple. The food they provided was not appropriate and he weighed 49kg on admission. He is still in hospital and will require care for the rest of his life. All the while they were telling his Mother and us that he was fine.

The Police interviewed my husband once, I spoke to them once on the phone and sent several emails detailing my concerns. After several months they eventually interviewed this couple where they were now living with his parents. They denied everything. I do not believe they even raised Elder Abuse, only the Cattle discrepancies. At one point we reported the abuse to the Police in Cairns who attended our home immediately but passed it on to the Dalby Police who did not even interview my Mother-in-Law. Finally we went to the Crime, Corruption Commission. They investigated and came back with 5 or 6 areas that they wanted the Police to investigate their handling of the matter as well as suggesting we should contact the Human Rights Commission, Queensland as they believed their had been a breach of her human rights.

It was sent back to the Police, to a Department who deals with complaints about themselves. Eventually, one Sunday Lunchtime while we were out with friends, an Officer called my husband to ask him about the case. We actually thought it was a scam and I had to contact the Police to see if this was real! I emailed the officer offering all the evidence the first Officers had declined; texts, photos emails etc. He was not interested. Some weeks later we got a letter from a Commissioner saying case closed and they were satisfied that there was no bases for the complaint!

My Mother-in-law had a fall and was mostly in hospital for the last 9 months of her life. She had a few weeks in a new nursing home in Dalby but she had a very poor quality of life by then. We visited often but she died alone one night. We took her to visit her son and she spoke to him regularly on the phone until she died. She was scared to the end that this family could harm her youngest son, even though he was in hospital in Toowoomba.

I still cannot believe this has happened to our family. We are both health Professionals and never having had dealings with the Police were naive to think that this sort of behavior is brushed under the carpet. It has made me very aware of the inadequacies we are left with in Queensland regarding Elder Abuse and its far reaching effects. The onus is on the victim to report the Abuse which is a crime in itself. Myself, I am mourning these two much loved parents whose lives ended very differently and I feel guilty I could not do more for my Mother-in-law.

I appreciated that this government has recognised the problem and is hopefully going to act on its findings. I am at a loss at how I can take this any further but urge you to raise the profile of Elder Abuse, provide a reporting structure, legislate realistic penalties and put in place deterrents to safe guard elderly people.

If I can provide any further information, please contact me,

yours sincerely

Sheena Cunningham

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