

Royal commission will finally give the elderly a voice

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“Elderly people have no status. Everybody knows that once you get old and you retire, you don't have any rights as elderly people.” They were shocking words spoken by Gwyneth Jones, who has lived in a retirement facility for more than a decade. Jones was admitted to a psychiatric ward involuntarily as staff at the retirement village hatched an elaborate plan to try and get rid of her.

The move by the Morrison Government to announce a royal commission into aged care will finally give the elderly a voice after a series of horrifying scandals rocked the nation. It comes as the ABC's Four Corners has been promoting a two-part series into aged care.

The rush to a royal commission smacks of policy on the run as the terms of reference are still to be drawn up and it is unclear whether they will include a massive part of the sector, retirement villages.



Over the years there have been a series of parliamentary inquiries into the sector but nothing has changed. The elderly have continued to suffer in silence and misconduct has been allowed to go unchecked. Some of the treatment metered out to the vulnerable has been gut-wrenching.

As the population ages, abuse will only get worse without reform. Unfortunately the Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Minister for Aged Care Ken

Wyatt and Health Minister Greg Hunt, in their rush to get a good headline, forgot to mention retirement villages in their press release, which is a multi-billion dollar sector that has had its own share of scandals.

This glaring omission comes despite stories of a 93-year-old woman died after she was trapped in the garden of a retirement village during a heatwave. No emergency buzzer had been installed outside to call for help or CCTV to ensure residents were safe.

A joint Fairfax Media-Four Corners investigation in 2017 uncovered a litany of questionable business practices at Aveo, including churning of residents, fee gouging and misleading marketing promises, such as safety and emergency services, made to some of the country's most vulnerable people.

There was the case of John Hayto, who spent five days on the floor without food, water or medication after falling. His cleaner found the 86-year-old in the nick of time but he spent more than eight months in rehabilitation. But Berkeley Living in Paterson Lakes, Victoria, took the cake, when bedridden residents were left to fend for themselves in the wake of a staff walkout. Due to lack of regulation of retirement villages, the operation was run by an operator who had a criminal past and connections to underworld figures. Just before Christmas these residents were moved on and the place closed down.

To include retirement villages into the remit takes some effort, including writing to the states. But if the government is truly serious about cleaning up this sector, it needs to do it. This is far too important an issue to be a half-baked royal commission.

As a society we need to treat the elderly better. When they move into a retirement village or aged care facility they need to know they will be treated with decency and respect and properly cared for. That means wholesale reforms and a royal commission that is broad enough to include retirement villages.