



Australian  
Nursing &  
Midwifery  
Federation

# **NATIONAL AGED CARE SURVEY 2019**

## **- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY MESSAGES**



**May 2019**



### About the ANMF

The ANMF is Australia's largest national union and professional nursing and midwifery organisation. In collaboration with the ANMF's eight state and territory branches, we represent the professional, industrial and political interests of 275,000 nurses, midwives and carers across the country.

Our members work in the public and private health, aged care and disability sectors across a wide variety of urban, rural and remote locations. We work with them to improve their ability to deliver safe and best practice care in each and every one of these settings, fulfil their professional goals and achieve a healthy work/life balance.

Our strong and growing membership and integrated role as both a professional and industrial organisation provide us with a complete understanding of all aspects of the nursing and midwifery professions and see us uniquely placed to defend and advance our professions. Through our work with members we aim to strengthen the contribution of nursing and midwifery to improving Australia's health and aged care systems, and the health of our national and global communities.

Annie Butler  
Federal Secretary

Lori-Anne Sharp  
Assistant Federal Secretary

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation  
Level 1, 365 Queen Street, Melbourne VIC 3000

T: 03 9602 8500

F: 03 9602 8567

E: [anmffederal@anmf.org.au](mailto:anmffederal@anmf.org.au)

W: [www.anmf.org.au](http://www.anmf.org.au)



## Acknowledgements

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) wishes to thank all the individuals across Australia who contributed their valuable time and knowledge by participating in the ANMF's National Aged Care Survey 2019.

The ANMF is grateful to the nurses, aged care workers, other staff, and especially to the community members, residents, family members, and loved ones who shared their views, experiences, and insight into the current situation of Australia's aged care system.

It is the ANMF's hope that this report, and the forthcoming companion report focussing upon the responses provided by community members, will underpin and hasten the desperately urgent actions needed to improve aged care in Australia to provide the level of quality, safety, and appropriateness that all recipients of aged care services deserve.



## Key Messages

- Continued, systemic failure in Australia's aged care sector and inaction by governments and providers have resulted in widespread failure to ensure safe, quality care to the residents of aged care facilities.
- Aged care staff feel unheard. They want to take pride in their work and provide residents with the highest standards of quality, safe, appropriate care in environments that are safe and supportive for themselves, the workers.
- Since the 2016 ANMF National Aged Care Survey, the situation has worsened; indifference and lack of respect for aged care residents and the staff that work there is increasingly prevalent while workloads, staffing levels, skills mix, and pay remain unchanged or worse.
- Staffing numbers, skills mix, staff training/qualifications, and experience continue to be at the forefront of aged care staff members' concerns with the aged care system and negatively impact upon the ability of staff to provide safe, quality care for all residents.
- Low numbers of staff and poor skills mixes result in poorer health outcomes for residents as well as staff members, including leaving the aged care sector or nursing profession.
- Lack of staff and inappropriate skills mixes mean that even the most basic care needs of residents, such as bathing, eating, and toileting are missed, neglected, or rushed.
- Adequacy of staffing to provide for high care needs is an emerging concern, with registered nurses especially indicating that there are simply not the right numbers or ratios of skilled, registered nurses and access to general practitioners and nurse practitioners to cope with the increasing number of residents with complex and severe conditions.
- Deteriorating staffing levels have resulted in greater safety risks for both residents and staff members.
- Government funding for aged care is inadequate and widely regarded to be misdirected away from providing safe, quality care to residents or utilised inappropriately.
- Untenable workloads due to lack of staffing and poor skills mixes deters recruitment and retention of workers and hinders staff ability to cope with incidents beyond 'standard routines'.
- Poorly considered provider protocols that penalise staff members arising in response to increased scrutiny place residents at risk of unsafe or poor quality care.
- Unnecessary transfers from residential aged care facilities to acute/emergency facilities that put residents at risk could be avoided with having appropriate staffing and skills mixes onsite, including greater access to general practitioners and nurse practitioners.
- End of life and advance care planning discussions in residential aged require greater attention and support to be effective and appropriate.
- Aged care staff feel increasingly blamed by providers, governments, and the community at large for deficiencies in safety and quality however observe that systemic failings and lack of support beyond their control, by providers, governments, and the sector overall are largely responsible for ensuring safety and quality.
- Improving staffing levels, skills mix, and the training/education of workers are urgently required to improve aged care services.
- Greater accountability for the delivery and use of aged care funding by providers and governments is vital to ensure safe, quality care for residents





## Executive Summary

### Introduction

The present study follows up on the previous 2016 National Aged Care Survey of staff and community members and identifies and examines key contemporary issues regarding participants' concerns and experiences with the Australian aged care system. In the broader context of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) and its members' concerns with the state of the Australian aged care sector, the present study had the objective of examining current concerns in aged care, adequacy of staffing levels and skills mix, adequacy of care delivery in residential aged care facilities, suggested improvements necessary of aged care, and voting intentions relating to aged care.

### Background

In 2016, the ANMF undertook its first national aged care survey with almost two and a half thousand participants. This initial survey was undertaken after more than a decade of ANMF campaigns calling for improvements in aged care to both increase and ensure safe, quality care for recipients of care and satisfactory working conditions for aged care staff.

Aged care in Australia has been in the spotlight and a key issue for the ANMF for many years, the ANMF has drawn attention to the shortcomings in the system, highlighting to governments, regulatory bodies, key stakeholders, the media, and the community critical issues related to the quality of care delivery.

In early 2018, the ANMF launched a new national campaign for safe staffing in aged care *Ratios for aged care, make them law NOW*. In September 2018, following an expose on residential aged care by the ABC's Four Corners program, the Prime Minister announced the establishment of a Royal Commission into aged care quality and safety with a final report due by 30 April 2020.

This report presents the results of the 2019 ANMF national aged care survey which was made available to aged care sector staff and community members shortly after the first Commission hearings. This report focusses largely upon responses provided by participants in 2019 and provides comparative results with the 2016 results where relevant. The present report focusses upon the responses provided by staff member participants while a companion report will present and analyse the responses provided by community members.

### Methods

The survey was open to prospective participants in all Australian States and Territories from 26 March to 12 April 2019. Two separate Survey Monkey® forms were used; one for aged care staff and one for community member participants. The staff survey incorporated 23 questions and the community member survey had 15, both included a mix of demographic items, multiple choice items, yes/no items, and free-text questions. Largely, the survey replicated that which was used by the ANMF in the 2016 national aged care survey, with some modifications made to questions and response options to update the survey in regard to the contemporary context.

The data collected from respondents was analysed using simple descriptive statistics and frequency counts as well as a process of general inductive qualitative analysis for qualitative data provided by respondents in open-ended or free-text fields.



### Results

Overall, 2,775 staff working within the aged care sector from all States and Territories answered at least one survey question. Almost equal numbers of staff worked in metropolitan (n = 1,033/ 38.5%) or regional areas (n = 1,076/ 40.1%). Most staff were registered nurses (n = 1,162/ 42%), with 791 (28.6%) identifying as AINs/PCAs/PCWs, and 434 (15.7%) as enrolled nurses. Most (n = 1,204 / 43.8%) worked within not-for-profit residential aged care, with 810 (29.4%) working in for-profit aged care, 216 (7.8%) in public or private hospitals, and 166 (6%) in public/government-owned residential aged care.

### Key Concerns

At almost 91% (n = 2,517) having 'adequate staffing levels for meeting basic care needs' for residents was the greatest concern among participants. This was closely followed by 'adequate staffing levels for providing high care' (82.5%/ n = 2,285). 'Dementia management' (n = 1,731/ 62.5%) and 'levels of experience and qualifications held by nursing staff' (n = 1,690/ 61%) were concerns for many staff. There was considerable consistency between concerns identified in 2016 and 2019. Major themes emerged regarding concerns with aged care; 'safety of staff', 'staffing inadequacies' and 'safety of residents'.

### Funding

Almost 90% (n= 2,392) of participants felt that funding for aged care in Australia is inadequate in 2019. While this appeared to be slightly lower than in 2016, where 93.7% felt that funding was inadequate, qualitative analysis of open-ended feedback revealed that participants felt that funding does not meet residents' care needs due to lack of transparency and accountability for funding, and an inappropriate funding model.

### Staffing and Skill mix

Inadequate staffing in aged care was noted by 89% (n = 2,406) of participants. This was an increase from the 2016 results where 79.2% (n = 1,310) indicated that staffing was inadequate. Analysis of in-depth responses revealed two major themes; 'lack of staff' and 'provider refusal to take on 'low care' residents'. In 2019, three-quarters of participants (n = 2,032) indicated that staff ratios were inadequate, an increase from the 2016 results (67.8%). Two main themes arose from participants' responses; inappropriate pressure/responsibility onto less skilled/experienced workers, and; lack of suitable numbers/availability of registered nurses. These highlighted the effects inadequate ratios of registered nurses have on care delivery and care staff, including nurses.

### Cost Shifting

Cost shifting from residential aged care facilities to residents and their family was less frequently noted by aged care staff in 2019 in comparison to 2016, however 37% (n = 914) of participants identified that residents/family members are being asked to pay for items that facilities once provided.

### Hospital Transfers

Three percent more respondents (55% n = 1,453) in 2019 reported unnecessary and avoidable resident transfers to hospital. A range of factors that contribute to and/or result in this situation were brought together under six themes; 'lack of experienced staff', 'facility policy', 'de-skilling', 'lack of opportunities to learn/train/educate', 'lack of resources', and 'family expectations'.



### ***End of Life Discussions***

Comparable to in 2016, while most participants (88%) indicated that end of life discussions did occur with residents and their families, they often identified that these discussions were not done well or at the right time, and that 'residents and/or families are reluctant and uncomfortable with the topic'.

### ***Staff Recruitment and Retention***

In both 2016 and 2019 surveys, workloads were identified by most participants as being the main factor that hindered efforts to recruit and retain staff; (47.4%/ n = 799) in 2016, and 39.1% (n = 1,079) in 2019. Analysis of in-depth responses indicated that many participants could not identify only one single factor, but highlighted that many related factors contributed to why nurses and care staff leave or do not want to work in aged care. Three main themes emerged from qualitative analysis; 'undervalued, under recognised, not respected', 'unable to provide quality/good care', and 'culture of blame'.

### ***Improving Aged Care Services***

Legislated minimum staffing levels was the most commonly identified factor by participants (84%/ n = 2,314) that could be implemented to improve aged care services. Participants also identified greater government funding for staffing (n = 2,031 / 73.6%), and legislated minimum skills mix, (n = 1,991 / 72.1%) as key actions. The actions identified from the responses offered by these participants provide suggested solutions to the problems and concerns that have been identified throughout this survey and encapsulated the fundamental responses needed from government and industry.

### ***Voting Intentions***

In 2019, 67% of participants indicated that if a political party made a major announcement to legislate for minimum staffing levels and skills mix to improve services and care to residents in aged care, they would vote to support them, just over 1% up from in 2016.

### ***Concluding comments***

Just over 1,000 participants (n = 1,086) provided concluding free-text comments or stories. Four key themes emerged which echoed participants' responses throughout the survey and encapsulated their overarching concerns with aged care and the causes of failings of the system. The themes were identified as; 'care is not the priority', 'lack of transparency', 'lack of responsibility of management, providers, government, and the system', and 'residents and staff are voiceless/unheard'.



### Discussion

The results of the ANMF's 2019 National Aged Care Survey presents a bleak picture of aged care in Australia. They describe a continued systemic failure to ensure safe and quality care to all aged care residents and suggest an abrogation of duty by governments and providers. Bleakest of all, the results present a picture of aged care that is unchanged from the one presented by the ANMF's 2016 Survey. Indifference and lack of respect for aged care residents and the staff that work there are increasingly prevalent while workloads, staffing levels, skills mix, and pay remain unchanged or worse. Continued, systemic failure in Australia's aged care sector and inaction by governments and providers have resulted in widespread failure to ensure safe, quality care to the residents of aged care facilities.

The accounts of the 2016 survey participants described a situation of widespread substandard care which offered neither dignity to the elderly at the end of their lives, nor to those who enter residential aged care facilities at younger ages. A situation that failed to recognise the contribution the elderly have made to Australian society by providing them with dignified care at the end of their lives and which, participants believed, represented a profound lack of respect for Australia's elderly.

The results from the 2019 Survey perpetuate this view. The most notable change is that the state of aged care has worsened. In 2016, participants described the situation in aged care as one approaching despair; in 2019 it is one in despair, with the feelings of desperation most acutely affecting aged care workers themselves.

While 2019 survey participants remain critically concerned about what they observe to be a widespread lack of regard and respect that the aged care system has for the elderly, the lack of value, worth, and respect they believe Australian society holds for them as workers in the industry has intensified. Participants also articulated the failings of the system, i.e. management, providers and government, more directly and frankly than in 2016.

The most significant change identified between the 2016 and 2019 survey participants from the qualitative data was an increased sense of despair. In the intervening three years, there have been more reports and inquiries into aged care, more requirements and standards (which translate into more management hoops for staff to jump through) introduced, dramatically increased media scrutiny, and a Royal Commission into aged care quality and safety. But aged care staff feel that nothing has changed in relation to their workloads, their staffing levels, or their pay and conditions.

Aged care staff feel they are being held accountable for the failings of the aged care system which, although having existed for some time, are now being exposed. Aged care staff also believe that many aged care employers, managers, and executives lack the necessary skills to run aged care facilities effectively so quickly resort to blaming staff for their own inadequacies. Staff also level this criticism at the government, which they describe not only as unskilled but worse, uncaring and without empathy. It is the pervasive lack of transparency in the sector that permits this all to continue.





A primary focus of participants is upon the negative impacts – on both residents and workers themselves – of not having enough staff or an appropriate skills mix. This focus extends to participants' suggestions regarding what could be done to improve aged care services. In 2016 and 2019, staff felt that improvements in the numbers and skills mixes of staff in aged care were vital for improving services. Staff also felt that training and regulation for all staff involved in direct care, and movement away from providers' focus on profits to more attention on minimum care standards for residents should be addressed to improve aged care in Australia.

Participants want the government and aged care providers to be held accountable for the delivery and use of funding and provision of care. Participants highlight a pressing need for greater transparency of the use of aged care funding by providers – to show that it is clearly being directed to the provision of safe, quality care and not to marketing and profits.

Aged care staff feel acutely the lack of respect and value that their employers and the wider community appear to have for them and the work that they do. Addressing both how management treat staff and provide support and appropriate safe working conditions, as well as how the community at large views those working in the aged care sector could vastly improve both the image of the sector for current and prospective workers and enable and facilitate safe, quality care for our elderly, which is at the heart of what aged care must be about.

## Conclusion

Aged care staff have long felt unheard, but as revealed by the 2019 National Aged Care Survey, they feel more voiceless than ever before. The vast majority of aged care staff, and many in the industry, want to be able to take pride in the work that they do, to be able to provide residents with the best standard of quality, safe care, and to be able to deliver that care in environments that are safe and supportive for themselves. However, staff are hampered by continued, systemic failure in Australia's aged care sector and inaction by governments and providers which have resulted in widespread failure to ensure safe, quality care to the residents of aged care facilities beyond the control of the staff themselves.

Aged care staff want to see Australian society take a moral and compassionate approach to our elderly, which would ensure them safe, dignified and respectful care at the end of their lives. This must also extend to the younger residents of aged care facilities.

The survey's participants believe this will require:

- Ensuring that care is the priority for the entire aged care system;
- Guaranteeing transparency in the use of tax payer funding, and ensuring it is tied to care provision;
- Ensuring genuine accountability of aged care management and providers as well as government for the quality of the aged care system; and,
- Ensuring the voices of aged care residents and staff are heard.

The participants are pleading for change, 'please, fix the system, please', one respondent implored. For their sake, and the sake of elderly Australians, the system must respond.

***“Aged care needs minimum staffing levels and more funding. It is terrible what those beautiful old people suffer in these places.”***

***- aged care staff member***

