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EXPERT WICKING TRUST PANEL EXAMINES THE 'WICKED PROBLEM' OF AGED CARE

Experts in aged care from around Australia and New Zealand came together this week to question the "wicked problem" of aged care in light of the forthcoming Royal Commission.

Managed by Equity Trustees, one of Australia's most significant charitable trusts, the Wicking Trust, hosts an annual symposium bringing together leading researchers in the areas of dementia and ageing. This year the symposium held in Melbourne and featuring the expert panel, heard that the Royal Commission offers opportunities for aged care.

"As a trustee with 130 years' experience working with people as they age, we are all too aware of the vulnerability that comes with ageing," said Ian Westley, Executive General Manager, Equity Trustees. "While we support people to control their financial assets and step in to protect their interests when they cannot, we also see just what can occur when people try to take advantage of frail aged people.

"Equity Trustees is proud to play our role in protecting individuals where we can – but also in managing the philanthropic legacy of John and Janet Wicking. It is their generosity that make it possible for the best minds in research, dementia and ageing to come together to discuss these critical issues at the forefront of public discussion right now."

Panel moderator Ian Hardy said 240,000 older Australians were placed in residential aged care, and 97,500 people were in receipt of a home care package in 2016/2017, with the numbers increasing each year.

"The Royal Commission is an opportunity for Australian society to have a conversation about what kind of aged care system we want in the future and what we are willing to pay for it," he told the audience.

The Royal Commission Terms of Reference have recognised the importance of building a national culture of respect for ageing and older persons.

The panel heard issues for the Royal Commission include funding, compliance and workforce. It heard that older people would benefit from improved connections and co-ordination between State and Federal services, aged care providers, families and caregivers.

The panel members were:

- Ian Hardy AM, CEO of Helping Hand Aged Care in South Australia and Wicking Trust member
- Psychogeriatrician Dr Duncan McKellar, from the Northern Adelaide Local Health Network, co-author of The Oakden Report and clinical lead of the Oakden reform process for SA Health.
- Professor Margaret O'Connor AM, Emeritus Professor of Nursing at Monash University and Wicking Trust member
- Associate Professor Amy Brodtmann, clinical researcher at the Florey Institute and Wicking Trust member; and
- Professor John Braithwaite, founder of the Regulatory Institutions Network (RegNet) at ANU.

The symposium heard that aged care – in the community, in residential care and in hospital, was often fraught for families. It is difficult for the balance between the health care and social needs of elderly people to be met.



Dr McKellar said people with complex clinical needs resulting from severe to extreme behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia may be excluded from mainstream aged care. He said he hoped the Royal Commission would understand this small but significant population have specialist needs that need to be considered in the broader service context.

“Just because they are difficult to care for doesn't reduce their value as people. They are someone's mother or father,” he said.

“As a society we share an investment in getting this right because it is our future as well”.

Professor O'Connor said a robust system would look at the staff skill and staff mix, with a professional workforce that is responsible and accountable.

The panel heard that the role of GPs in attending patients in residential care also needs to be examined.

Associate Professor Brodtmann said a mix of people is needed to take care of aged people.

“It is extremely difficult to attract people to this sector. We need to find incentives, including financial, and take away the stigma of aged care,” she said.

Professor Braithwaite said regulation of the sector, including regular inspections, was important. He said it was hard for people to navigate a market driven system to know what quality of care was being provided. He encouraged families to consider respite care to test quality for their relatives.

The panel agreed that a change in community attitude to aged care was needed.

“We do need to champion a positive view of aged care and aging. We can bring about positive changes and set high standards, even for really difficult challenges like caring for the aged with dementia,” Dr McKellar said.

The panel encouraged the Royal Commission not to focus on “how bad” aged care is, but to ask “how can we best deliver services to the elderly who require care?”

“We should be having a national conversation about what makes for a good old age and how this can be supported until death,” Mr Hardy said.

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