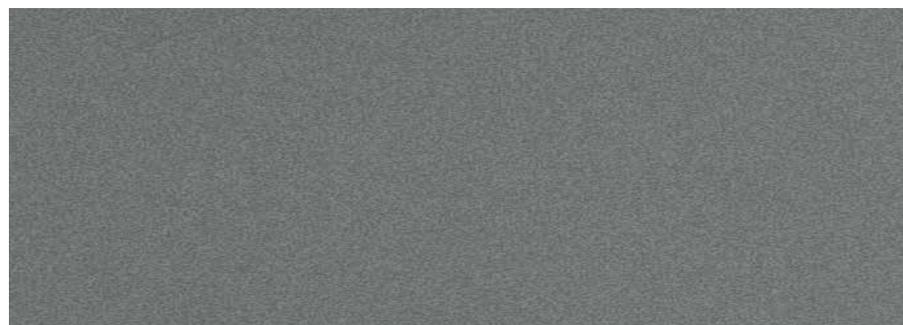


**The Hon.
Elisabeth Kirkby**



Fair care for all Australians

It is possible to be optimistic about 'old age' care and we should be able to provide outstanding solutions to this multi-faceted problem.



Pessimists declare that Australians will not be able to afford nursing home care in the future.

Before I came to live in Sydney in 1965, I worked for fifteen years in Kuala Lumpur. I made many friends there, Malay, Chinese, Indian and I was always impressed by the way they cared for their parents and elderly relatives.

They were always cared for at home, either in their own homes or in their children's home. This meant that they never lost touch with grandchildren or great grandchildren. This close family life does not seem to have changed over the years; when I go back now to visit friends, there is nearly always an elderly relative living in the house as well, part of an extended family.

The difference in Australia is striking, perhaps because people have smaller families, but more probably because a culture has developed here that has encouraged the idea that the end of life in will be spent

in a nursing home. This culture is now entrenched, leading to gloomy prognostications about the cost as the pessimists declare that Australians will not be able to afford nursing home care in the future, there will be too many old people to look after.

I believe it is possible to be more optimistic about old age care. It is likely that the age of retirement will inevitably rise from 65 years to 70 years, also that the age of 60 will be regarded as the new 40, and that current advances in medicine will persuade older Australians that a healthy life-style will ensure a healthy old age. In spite of the fact that many Australians are grossly obese, many others stop smoking, drink in moderation, eat fruit and vegetables, and exercise.

In the 1990s, as a member of the Social Issues Committee of the New South Wales



Legislative Council, I visited many nursing homes in the state; in many cases, I was appalled about the standard of care. The unpleasant smell was overwhelming, the furnishings were shabby and residents were sitting around television screens, often sleeping or apathetic.

I know that much has changed, but even so there are still nursing homes where conditions are sub-standard and where the advances in aged care that have been achieved are ignored.

In 2014, it is recognised that most residents need stimulating activities, that they need gentle exercise and as much freedom as their condition permits. It should be accepted that they are allowed to live in dignity, able to choose how they spend their time, what they eat and how they dress. Medical research now proves that the onset of dementia can be delayed through exercise and diet, that yoga and tai chi are good for brain function, much better than crossword puzzles or sudoku.

In Australia, we may never change the culture, we may never emulate the care found in Malay or Chinese families, but we should be able to provide an outstanding community alternative. This will mean that all Australians should accept that 'productivity' does not mean longer hours and lower wages, but a culture which ensures that aged care workers are highly trained and well-paid, that nursing homes are inviting, properly equipped and maintained. Above all, that the duty of care for the elderly is the responsibility of all the staff, not only specialist nurses.

If nursing homes are to be regarded as business ventures, then the level of profit must reflect the services provided. There must be a standard that all nursing homes achieve; such standards apply in the hotel industry, but they are even more necessary in aged care, as the clients can't just move on to find more suitable accommodation. They are often limited by lack of choice; in many areas, it is not even possible for their relatives to build a 'granny flat' because of restrictions imposed by local government regulations. But community residential care for the aged is a priority that no government can ignore.

It is more important than spending tax payers' money on the military, on sporting activities or on border protection. If the private sector is to be involved, the profits achieved must be fair and reasonable. Luxury hotels and apartments are for the very wealthy, few of Australia's elderly fall into that category.

Above all, standards must be high, no old person in Australia should have to suffer the indignity of incontinence, and the loving care that they knew at the beginning of their life is just as important to them at the end.

It is obvious that there are already many older Australians who suffer advanced dementia, Alzheimer's disease or are suffering the effects of a severe stroke or heart attack, their care needs to be more specialised, their 'carers' need to be highly motivated and the stressful nature of their job has to be recognised.

The provision of care is a multi-faceted problem which deserves the closest scrutiny if handicapped and elderly Australians are to be treated with the respect that is their due. **FS**

The Honourable Elisabeth Kirkby (OAM, PHD) was Sydney University oldest graduate when she obtained her PHD at 90 years old. Of British origin, she has been a theatre and television actress at the BBC and the ABC. She is a former politician with the Australian Democrats and was a member of the Social Issues Committee that conducted the inquiry into aged care in the New South Wales Parliament in 1997. She helped put together the 'Caring for the aged report'.



The quote

If nursing homes are to be regarded as business ventures, then the level of profit must reflect the services provided.