

# Ratings a good first step

BY JENNY DENTON

THE creation of the myaged-care.gov.au ratings system was a recommendation of the Royal Commission into Aged Care, whose damning 2021 report found at least one in three people accessing residential aged care and home care services had experienced substandard care, and concluded "a fundamental overhaul" of aged care in Australia was required.

This needed to include "a philosophical shift" to place the people receiving care at the centre of quality and safety regulation, the commissioners said.

The ratings, which heavily weight residents' feedback on their experiences and measure the number of nursing and care hours an average resident receives as well as assessing a series of quality measures and facilities' compliance, are intended to "allow older people and their families to make meaningful comparisons of the quality and safety performance of services and providers".

However, the system has been attacked both by critics



Shadow Minister for Health and Aged Care Anne Ruston has called the system unfair.

condemning it as too generous to aged care operators - given more than 90 per cent of facilities across the country initially received a three-star rating - and by providers, many of whom claim the

data used is outdated and unfairly represents them. Several local facilities told the *Bendigo Advertiser* their rating was incorrect and would soon be updated by the health department.

The Shadow Minister for Health and Aged Care Anne Ruston has called the system unfair in its demands on time-poor aged care operators, who are battling chronic workforce shortages

while continuing to deal with COVID-19 outbreaks.

She said the situation was particularly difficult in rural and regional areas where operators did not receive the support they needed.

However, according to La Trobe University expert and John Richards Centre for Rural Ageing Research director, Professor Irene Blackberry, while the ratings system may have teething problems, it is a positive first step.

"What the government is trying to do is make the system a bit more transparent and the care providers more accountable as to what they're delivering, and also for the consumer - the residents and the family - to better understand what they are getting into," she said.

"Because this is a new system we are encountering quite a lot of problems [such as] some facilities complaining that the data is out of date and some people complaining that this is being rushed by the government.

"Obviously, it still requires a lot of work to make it perfect, but at least it gives people a national benchmark

or indicator, or standards, if you like."

Ms Blackberry said the data being collected was complicated and also had limitations in terms of the biases involved when facilities self-reported or selected residents to be interviewed about their experiences.

There was also a lack of sensitivity in the information.

For example, the nutritional value of food wasn't being measured but only residents' opinion of it.

"There was a comment by the Dietitians Association of Australia saying, 'You can't just ask the residents, you know, do you like the food?'," she said.

Ms Blackberry said in April more quality indicators, including hospitalisation and staff turnover rates, would be added.

Anyone assessing aged care options should study the ratings information "deeply" and also visit the facility in question to observe how it operates and whether it can "actually meet the needs of your loved one or not", she said.

## New system rates aged care homes

BY JENNY DENTON

THREE out of 14 Bendigo aged care homes have received unsatisfactory two-out-of-five star ratings in the federal government's new online aged care star rating system, indicating "improvement [is] needed".

When the ratings system was launched on the myagedcare.gov.au website in mid-December, 90 per cent of facilities across the country were rated three stars or above, with only 8 per cent scoring two stars and 1 per cent each in the one- and

five-star categories. The local two-star-rated homes - Bupa Bendigo and the Royal Freemasons Flora Hill and Bendigo facilities - have received the poor ratings due to compliance failures, having received notices from the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission over their failure to meet federal Aged Care Quality Standards. All three facilities have received two or more non-compliance notices since 2019. All three say they have now resolved the issues in question. Bupa Bendigo's

most recent non-compliance notice was issued in September 2021. "We've invested significantly in uplifting our quality measures and resident experience and believe we're well positioned to improve our ratings over coming months," a spokesperson for the company said. Both Royal Freemasons facilities received their most recent notices in November 2022. Royal Freemasons CEO John Fogarty said in response to compliance notices issued in November 2022 at the or-

ganisation's Kangaroo Flat and Flora Hill facilities it had appointed a nurse advisor, allocated a support team to work with residents and staff on care plans and adopted a targeted education plan for all staff. "The process of sustaining and embedding change at any home takes time and we remain committed to working with staff on ensuring this happens and results in positive outcomes for our residents," he said. "The approach we are taking is one we have had much success with recently."

Seven more Bendigo aged care homes have received compliance notices in the past few years which have since been resolved. In addition to compliance issues, the ratings system assesses residents' experience, a series of "quality measures" and staffing levels. Six local facilities which have an overall "acceptable" three-star rating are currently assigned only a one-star score in the sub-categories of either "quality measures" or staffing. Bendigo Health-run facilities Carshalton House, Gold-

en Oaks, Simpkin House and the Gibson Street complex (Stella Anderson and Joan Pinder nursing homes) all received just one star for the "quality measures" category. However, the Department of Health confirmed the Bendigo Health facilities had received the one-star score due to a failure to meet legislated requirements by reporting data on time. Mr Fogarty said low staffing ratings were representative of a widespread shortage of workers in the aged care and health industries.

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