Elderly people die alone and unnoticed in Australia

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4 May 2006

Between mid February and early March seven decomposed bodies of elderly people were found in New South Wales, the most populous state of Australia. Five were discovered in just ten days. That frail and vulnerable members of society could literally rot to death without being noticed, in some cases for up to eight months, has provoked a deep sense of shock among ordinary people.

The tragedies were reported in the national media, and radio talk back shows were dominated with debates on the gruesome findings. It was not long, however, before the media buried the issue.

Government officials and charity groups immediately blamed the communities where the seven had lived. The events arose from "a lack of sense of community" and the reluctance of neighbours to "look out for each other". Even if that were true, what has never been probed is what the deaths reveal about the social relations that have led to such an atomised state of affairs.

Little information has been reported about the circumstances that led to the deaths and even less appears to be known about the lives of the individuals involved. This itself points to the growth of marginalised, alienated and neglected layers of society whose needs, concerns and plight are ignored and regarded as insignificant.

The case of an elderly man found dead in a unit in the inner-Sydney suburb of Surry Hills, who may have died more than six months earlier, epitomised this state of affairs. He lived in the 600-unit Northcott complex, the largest public housing estate in the southern hemisphere. Thousands of tenants are crammed into maze-like accommodation, often poorly maintained and run down. The possibility that one's existence could go unnoticed, given the lack of any social network systems to monitor health and well-being, was all too evident.

Days earlier, the badly decomposed body of an elderly woman was found in her home in Umina, on the NSW central coast. Her death was discovered after postal workers became concerned that she had not collected her mail since October.

In the same week, a retired couple in their 80s was found dead in their unit in the wealthy suburb of Neutral Bay on Sydney's north shore. They had taken an overdose of pills. The man, 82, had been ill for some time and his wife, 78, had also been unwell.

The body of a 64-year-old man, believed to have been dead for eight months, was found the same week in a unit in Sydney's inner city suburb Waterloo. He also lived in high-rise public housing accommodation. An 86-year-old woman was found dead in her home at Gordon, on Sydney's north shore, in March and it is believed that she had died some months earlier.

Another tragic case made national news last December. A 94-year-old disabled woman and her 61-year-old son died in a house at Rooty Hill, in Sydney's western suburbs. Their bodies were not discovered for over a month. The son, who was the full-time carer of his chronically ill mother, slipped in the bath while having a shower, knocked himself unconscious and died. His mother, unable to reach a telephone, starved to death.

The case provoked much anger and outrage in the community as it brought to light the total dependency of tens of thousands of elderly and disabled people on support from family members, because of the deterioration of the health and welfare system.

In response to these tragedies, the only measure the state Labor government could propose was a review of procedures for checking on public housing tenants. Yet Housing Minister Cherie Burton immediately deemed

even this meagre proposal to be unworkable and ineffective. She claimed that with 200,000 public housing residents, checks could be implemented only twice a year at best.

Burton insisted that individuals should take responsibility for the health and safety of the elderly: "No amount of government checking or department of housing checking can replace neighbours knowing each other and knowing each others' routines."

As a matter of fact, every single dead body was eventually discovered by concerned neighbours or, in one case, postal workers. Not one was found by a government or health agency. That disabled, elderly and ill citizens can be neglected for years and that no welfare network exists for ensuring their well being is indicative of a deeply diseased social order.

Once it becomes impossible to squeeze profit out of the labour of working people, they are routinely discarded by officialdom and regarded as a burden on society. Welfare and community support for the elderly comes almost exclusively from charitable agencies, which are poorly funded and often rely on volunteers.

Limited government schemes, such as "home help" and "staying at home" programs, are usually not widely publicised. It is up to individuals to approach such agencies, and waiting lists can be long. Often it is only those who have forceful and insistent family members who end up accessing these services.

Sons and daughters and other family members of the elderly are increasingly unable to afford the money or time to care for them. They are likely to be working long hours, juggling odd shifts or employed in insecure jobs, and struggling to make ends meet with low wages, high mortgage and credit card debts, exorbitant child care and medical expenses and rising petrol and other prices. These pressures are felt most heavily in Sydney, where housing and other living costs are higher than in other parts of the country.

The wealthy aged may have private medical cover, hired home assistance and access to recreational and sporting activities. Many poorer pensioners however, are forced to live an isolated and impoverished existence. Seventy six percent of people over the age of 75 rely on a government pension. A single person receives just over $200 a week, an amount that makes it impossible to lead a healthy and active lifestyle.

Those seeking nursing home or hostel accommodation face a chronic shortage of places, long waiting lists and huge fees. Both low care and extensive care nursing homes demand bonds to guarantee a place. In 2005, the average bond was $127,000—a fourfold increase since 1995. Basic nursing home accommodation costs more than $10,000 a year for full pensioners.

With most nursing homes run by the private sector, care for the elderly, like all other social facilities, has become a profitable big business. The total value of bonds alone, usually financed through the sale or mortgaging of the residents' previous homes, is $3.5 billion.

These developments are part of a wholesale government shift away from elementary social welfare in every sphere—from child care to aged care. In the name of "individual responsibility", the burden of essential services is being imposed on ordinary working people, while boosting the profits of private providers and cutting taxes for the benefit of the wealthy and big business.

The "lack of sense of community" is a product of the alienation and social dislocation created by consistent budget and welfare cuts over the past two decades by both Labor and Liberal governments.

The lonely deaths and other tragic consequences can be averted only by reorganising society on the basis of human need, not private profit. Billions of dollars must be made available for high-quality social facilities and services for the elderly. The below poverty-level pensions must be lifted to allow for a decent standard of living.

The frail elderly must not be forced to sell their homes and limited assets for nursing home accommodation. Massive funds must be injected into housing, medical and recreational facilities to enable all retired people to participate in life to the fullest extent possible. Senior citizens must have the fundamental right to access all the amenities necessary to live in dignity and security.

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