

Australia: Elderly patients die in Sydney nursing home fire

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A fire at a corporate-owned nursing home at Quakers Hill in Sydney's northwest, which claimed the lives of at least nine elderly residents, with nine still on life support in hospital, has highlighted numerous problems within Australia's chronically under-funded aged care system.

The blaze broke out just before 5 a.m. on November 18. Fire and emergency services, located nearby, arrived within six minutes but were unable to save many of the frail residents, indicating how quickly the flames took hold.

A nurse at the facility has been charged with murder, accused by the police of starting the fire. The mainstream media has latched onto the arrest, proclaiming the nurse guilty before any trial. This witchhunt has created a diversion from the many issues raised about the levels of staffing, safety standards and quality of care in the nursing home industry, regardless of whether arson was involved.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard offered her condolences to the families who lost loved ones, describing the event as "truly horrifying." The appalling conditions in the industry, however, are primarily the responsibility of her government, which controls the funding of the aged care system, and shares with state governments the supervision of building and safety standards.

Mark Butler, Gillard's minister for aging, immediately sprang to the defence of the government's regulators and the operators, the Domain Principal Group. He stated that the nursing home had recently met the standards set by the federal Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency. "I'm advised that this facility had an audit of their fire safety systems as

recently as July and again was found to be compliant," he said.

The single-storey building contained standard fire safety equipment, such as fire extinguishers and fire doors, but no sprinkler system was installed, as this was not required under New South Wales (NSW) state law. Only nursing homes of four storeys or more are required to have sprinklers.

Most of the residents were infirm and unable to make their own escape, much less fight a fire. Newer buildings have sprinkler systems but older facilities such as Quakers Hill, which was built in 1981, would require expensive work to fit them.

Peter Chenoweth, the director of CH Group, a major building contractor for aged care facilities, claimed that sprinklers were unnecessary because fire doors and special building materials were sufficient. Yet initial reports indicate that the fire doors were unable to prevent the smoke from spreading once the blaze took hold and that a sprinkler system could have minimised the fire's size and spread.

Only one registered nurse and four assistants were on duty at the time of the fire, caring for at least 88 residents. NSW law requires only one registered nurse to be on duty at one time. Despite brave rescue efforts, there was no way that the small staff could manage such a crisis.

There has long been concern within the aged care profession over nurse staffing levels, with poor conditions and pay causing many to leave the industry. Understaffing has become a major issue throughout the aged care sector because of under funding and the

difficulties in hiring nurses and other staff to work under onerous conditions.

Nevertheless, NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell claimed that the tragedy was an "isolated incident" that did not reflect upon the condition of aged care facilities across the state. He also called for more stringent police checks of nursing staff, playing into the media campaign to shift public attention onto the charges against the nurse.

The case against the nurse remains entirely unclear and unproven, fed by unconfirmed media reports that he was interviewed by the police the day before the fire. This has not stopped the media from declaring him guilty, with the Sydney *Sunday Telegraph* publishing a banner headline: "Killer Within Quakers Hill Inferno."

Among the issues being buried is the fact that the Domain Principal Group is the largest corporate owner of aged care facilities in Australia, operating 58 homes, mostly in NSW. The group is owned by AMP Life, an insurance company that is part of AMP Capital. In 2010, Domain Principal posted revenue of \$198 million and a 9 percent boost in net profit to \$895,000, which it achieved after it "continued to focus on cost saving," according to business analysts Company 360. Domain Principal received more than \$212 million in federal government funding in the 2009-10 financial year.

Domain Principal has been previously sanctioned for failing to maintain acceptable standards at its facilities. These cases included concerns over residents' nutrition and hydration at Calamvale in Queensland and the revoking of Domain Principal's licence as an aged care provider at Inverloch in Victoria for "continued non-compliance." Between 2008 and 2010, a series of incidents were reported at Domain Principal facilities, including an assault against a resident at Quakers Hill in August 2010.

Such complaints extend beyond a single company. In 2000, the for-profit Riverside Nursing Home in Sydney was closed down after it had subjected its residents to kerosene baths to fight scabies. The subsequent investigation exposed systematic maltreatment throughout the aged care system.

Decent aged care exists for those who can afford substantial fees. In May, Domain Principal opened a \$30 million facility in the Sydney suburb of Chiswick, which resembles a luxury hotel. Working class retirees, by contrast, are increasingly relegated to institutions where they are accommodated as cheaply as possible. Even so, places can be difficult to find and can cost more than \$15,000 a year.

Over the past three decades, successive federal governments have sought to further privatise the aged care industry and shift the costs of care onto the elderly themselves. Most recently, three months ago, the Gillard government released a major report, entitled "Caring for Older Australians," that recommended that the elderly be required to pay up to 35 percent of their own costs and that they fund that contribution from the value of their homes, using so-called reverse mortgages. The changes are designed to meet the industry's demand for higher and more secure profits.

Under the profit system, elderly workers who are no longer able to be profitably employed are viewed by governments and the corporate elite as baggage to be discarded as quickly as possible. Rather than living their final years in dignity, comfort and security, as they are entitled to be, aged care residents are regarded only as sources of profit for the companies and finance houses that have invested in the industry. As people live longer, thanks to advances in medical science, the exploitation of the elderly infirm will become an increasingly major social and political issue.

The author recommends:

Australia: Report recommends "user pays" for aged care
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