

# Family members protest amid six more deaths at Australian aged care home

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There is shock and outrage among affected family members after six more residents died from COVID-19 within two days this week at an aged care facility in western Sydney, bringing the death toll at the Anglicare-operated Newmarch House to 12.

By yesterday, 56 people, including 22 staff and 34 residents, had tested positive at the facility in Caddens, near Penrith, in just 19 days, after an infected employee inadvertently spread the virus by working five shifts.

Adding to the alarm of family members is that only one of the 12 victims was taken to hospital to receive intensive care unit (ICU) treatment. Anglicare said it had turned the facility into a “pseudo-hospital,” without specifying what acute medical resources exist. Moreover, Anglicare yesterday declared that further deaths are anticipated among the remaining 80 residents.

This rapidly developing outbreak underscores the acute danger of a new wave of COVID-19 infections as governments and business chiefs step up their drive for a premature return to work. It also points to the still shocking conditions inside Australian aged care homes despite the damning revelations at last year’s Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

The news of four of the latest six deaths was released on Tuesday, just hours after New South Wales state Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced the easing of some social distancing restrictions despite acknowledging that her government expected that “more cases” would result.

After Tuesday’s terrible news, a group of 94 relatives and friends, called Families and Friends of Newmarch House Residents, issued an open letter to Anglicare CEO Grant Millard, politicians and media outlets, protesting against the lack of information about the conditions inside the facility.

Group members have been protesting outside Newmarch House each afternoon. They wrote that since the first virus infection was reported, “Many more issues

came to light and we, as family members, were left in the dark not knowing what was happening in relation to the residents.

“Phones went unanswered day after day. Calls were not returned. Details about our individual loved one were not provided regularly. The residents were reporting that the care was inadequate and they were becoming distressed. Many of them were sick and frightened and did not have regular access to their family on the outside which increased their levels of anxiety as well as ours.”

The letter commented: “It is important to remember that the people residing in Newmarch House are vulnerable, physically and mentally. They have been isolated in the facility since midnight on March 23 2020 with restricted visiting hours enforced from March 18 and fully isolated in their individual rooms since the virus was brought into and later discovered in Newmarch.”

Residents have died without their families even being able to contact them to say goodbye. The open letter outlined 10 requests, starting with “daily scheduled face to face time contact” with loved ones, a 12-hour a day hotline for communication with residents infected with COVID-19 and permission for two family members at a time to see and phone residents behind their closed windows.

Other requests expressed concerns that coronavirus infections are being covered up and residents are receiving inadequate medical treatment. The letter called for “Removal of the wording ‘underlying issues’ or ‘multiple underlying issues’ from statements issued to media and the Newmarch community when advising of a resident’s passing.”

The letter called for “continued daily updates from Anglicare that include the current number of positive cases at Newmarch in each update” and a “weekly health report for each individual resident emailed to the nominated family member, including details of doctor

visits, physiotherapy sessions etc.”

Further requests related to food and sanitation. One was for “current menu plans outlining breakfast, lunch and dinners covering each week.” Another was for “details about the laundering of clothing... How often is laundering and ironing being carried out?”

One of the letter’s authors, Louisa Payne, posted on Facebook Anglicare’s dismissive response. “I am outraged!!” she wrote. Without providing any explanation, Millard’s reply stated: “I cannot commit to all the requests you make below as being feasible, safe or appropriate.”

At the same time, Millard employed stock phrases, such as “Anglicare is endeavouring to be transparent about all that is taking place in Newmarch House” and “I have accepted these requests in good faith and they will be seriously addressed.”

Earlier, Elizabeth Lane, told the *Guardian* her mother, who is in a palliative care ward with severe dementia, had tested positive for COVID-19. She then suffered a severe sore throat but was only given a remote consultation with a doctor at nearby Nepean hospital.

Lane had tried bypassing the overloaded reception phone and calling the nurses’ station in her mother’s ward directly to receive information. Later, that number showed as disconnected. “We are all so worried,” Lane said. “We’re thinking, are we going to be the next ones to get a phone call?”

Both the state and federal governments tried to deflect the outrage by crying crocodile tears over the latest deaths. Federal Aged Care Minister Richard Colbeck said on Tuesday he was “devastated” by the news. But yesterday he revealed the government’s true callous indifference. He told Nine television’s “Today” show: “Unfortunately there may be more [in Newmarch House]... It’s just the effect of this virus.”

Likewise, Premier Berejiklian said she too was “devastated.” She said: “It reminds us how contagious this virus is and how it attacks the elderly and vulnerable in particular. Our hearts go out to all the families of the people who have succumbed to the disease and all the families who are really worried about their loved ones.”

This is sheer hypocrisy from the governments that are directly responsible for this appalling situation, both in their inadequate response to the pandemic and their long record of facilitating profit-driven cost-cutting throughout nursing homes.

Acting on the corporate elite’s demands for workers to be pushed back into workplaces to resume profit

generation, these governments are rushing to remove social distancing protocols even though COVID-19 testing remains at low levels.

Major COVID-19 clusters such as Newmarch House and in hospitals in northwest Tasmania and Melbourne are a glaring warning of how rapidly infection can spread.

Newmarch House is not the first nursing home in NSW to suffer a wave of COVID-19 infections. An outbreak at Dorothy Henderson Lodge, in the Sydney suburb of Macquarie Park, claimed six lives between March 3 and April 6.

The conditions inside Newmarch House show that despite last year’s royal commission, governments have done nothing to halt the relentless drive for profit that has long made cost-cutting and under-staffing rampant in the multi-billion dollar aged care industry.

The royal commission’s interim report concluded that up to half of residents in aged care facilities suffer from malnutrition as a result of inedible and non-nutritious food or the lack of enough staff to assist residents who cannot feed themselves. Testimony was presented of some providers budgeting less than \$7 per day per resident for food.

Other evidence showed that more than three quarters of residents suffer incontinence, often sitting for hours in wet and soiled nappies, along with the widespread use of “chemical restraints” to sedate and control residents.

For decades, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike have handed over vulnerable older people to corporate and nominally charitable organisations, leaving only 9 percent of aged care facilities managed by governments. Aged care providers were predicted to make profits totalling \$1.7 billion during the 2018–19 financial year, boosted by billions of dollars in government subsidies.



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