

# Australia: Deaths in Perth nursing home underscore aged care crisis

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22 April 2021

Police are reportedly investigating the death, on April 6, of an 89-year-old female resident at Regis Healthcare Limited's Nedlands Aged Care home in the Western Australian capital of Perth. The death followed those of two other residents in the past three months that were the subject of police investigation and reports of neglect and abuse.

One was 86-year-old Brian Hunter, who died on January 20. Two days before Christmas, according to an investigation by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" program, he was discovered to have been left on the rooftop terrace of the nursing home, unsupervised, for nearly two hours in the middle of a heatwave where temperatures peaked at 40 degrees Celsius.

Hunter was rescued around 3:05 p.m. when a visitor saw him on the roof unconscious. Hunter was a double amputee having lost both of his legs from complications arising from diabetes, suffered serious blisters and burns, and was found to be dehydrated and in a state of delirium.

Police reported that CCTV footage showed Hunter sitting in a wheelchair inside by the doors when, at 1:10 p.m., a Regis staff member entered the access code and opened the doors, letting Hunter on to the roof terrace.

Hunter's daughter, Lea Hammond, said her father's cognition was failing due to a fall at Regis the month before that left him with a black eye and a brain injury. Remarkably, after the fall Regis had not sent Hunter to hospital. It was only at the insistence of his daughter that this was done.

After being found burned and unconscious, Hunter was bedridden in hospital for four weeks. According to Hammond, nobody from Regis called her while her father was hospitalised. "At the end of his life, Dad barely spoke," she told "7.30." "He wasn't speaking at

all. They had to feed-tube him because he couldn't swallow. And he barely recognised us."

Hammond commented: "He was just a great father, wonderful grandfather, fantastic husband. This is just so distressing to see him being treated in that manner. I think he was just totally neglected, it's awful."

Hammond wrote to Regis CEO Linda Mellors. On the day her father died, she received a reply. The letter apologised "for your experience, and that we did not meet expected care standards." Mellors promised an internal investigation.

A week later, the police from Western Australia's Major Crime Squad reported that there was "no evidence of criminality." Hammond told "7.30" she "was really shocked... to me this is criminal abuse... but there's no charges laid against anyone."

In the days before Hunter's death, six nursing students from Edith Cowan University were sent to Regis Nedlands for their first clinical placements. Between January 11 and 13, the students reported abuse, widespread neglect, rough handling and sexually inappropriate behaviour at the nursing home.

One case the students reported was that of Dik Lee, whose family had paid \$500,000 in March last year for his residence at the centre. Lee, 94, died the day after Brian Hunter's death. He had allegedly been abused and improperly cared for by staff. One of the trainee nurses reported that she had "found Mr Lee (who is always in a wheelchair) on the floor near the entrance of his room completely unclothed and sitting in his faeces with [a carer] standing over him."

A few days later, Lee came down with a fever and was bedridden. The doctors attending the home prescribed antibiotics and rest. Lee was taken to hospital where he fell into a five-day coma and suffered liver failure. He was dead within 24 hours.

Lisa Chan, Lee's daughter, told "7.30:" "Just imagine if a child is being abused at school—that teacher would be held accountable for the abuse of the child... but my dad actually died due to the abuse, so why can't it be a criminal investigation?"

In November 2019, the Regis Nedlands facility was placed under sanctions for putting the health and safety of residents at "serious risk." However, in February 2020, the facility was given a 100 percent score by the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission.

Regis Healthcare Limited is one of the country's largest sharemarket-listed aged care companies. According to its 2020 annual report, it has been "dedicated to aged care with dignity for over 25 years." It has grown to own more than 7,000 "operational places" at 65 residential aged care homes, as well as six home-care services, five day-therapy centres and eight retirement villages across Australia.

The annual report says the company's profit after tax was \$3,764,000, a sharp fall from \$50,897,000 in 2019. According to "7.30," Regis's 65 nursing homes last year received a total of \$471 million in government subsidies, "its two co-founders are worth more than \$1 billion and its CEO is on the federal government's Aged Care Advisory Group."

Families hoping to provide high-quality medical care and support for their elderly loved ones are required to make down-payments of up to \$1.4 million to secure a residency at Regis Nedlands. However, these huge prices do not ensure adequate staffing levels.

A Regis worker at a different facility told 7NEWS that it was so severely understaffed that residents were sometimes left in soiled clothing for 12 hours. "We try to attend as much as we can but still we don't have time," she said. "Two staff looking after 50 residents—it's not possible."

7NEWS last month reported the death of 89-year-old Norma Palmer—a resident of the Regis Birkdale facility in Brisbane, Queensland—last July. She was reportedly neglected while suffering from sepsis, which led to terrible tissue degeneration in sores on her lower leg and back.

The latest federal government Royal Commission into Aged Care—the 24th such inquiry in the past three decades—revealed dangerous levels of understaffing, low rates of registered nurses and inadequate training of personal carers, which has created a disaster for

residents and their families, producing the conditions where the alleged neglect and abuse can take place.

Over the past 30 years, chronically low staffing levels have become part of the business model of the profit-driven aged care sector. The consequences have been seen most sharply in the COVID-19 pandemic. Aged care homes became death-traps for vulnerable residents. So far, 678 have died from the coronavirus, amounting to 75 percent of the national total of 910 reported deaths.

Successive Liberal-National Coalition and Labor Party governments have enforced this corporate-dominated aged care regime, brushed aside all the previous inquiry recommendations and slashed funding. The Royal Commission calculated that "efficiency dividends" and rationing of nursing home places since 1997 had reduced federal government aged care spending by almost 50 percent, or \$9.8 billion a year by 2018–19.

This will not change as a result of the latest Royal Commission, none of whose 65 recommendations are even enforceable. Residents' care will continue to be sacrificed in the interests of private profit.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's Coalition government reportedly plans to allocate \$10 billion over four years in this year's May 11 budget for as-yet unspecified "reforms" to the sector. That amount is far less than the \$10 to \$20 billion *a year* estimated by the Royal Commission to be needed to implement its recommendations.



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