Australia: ABC program exposes cruelty of Labor's aged care schemes

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) flagship "Four Corners" television program on Monday provided a damning, if partial, view of the immense suffering of the elderly under the Labor government's substantially privatised aged care schemes.

Hundreds of thousands of retired workers and their families are being denied adequate support packages or left waiting interminably for basic services. Titled "The Waiting Game," the broadcast reported that more than a quarter of a million people are waiting for home care funding, and that 4,800 people died in 2024–25 while waiting.

Some 98,606 people are waiting to be assessed, some for many months. A further 48,000 people are on a triage waiting list—literally a waiting list to get onto the waiting list for an assessment. Then according to the government's own figures about 100,000 elderly are waiting to receive services even after being assessed.

The program revealed that this last figure is not 100,000, but almost 154,000. Since government's Support at Home scheme commenced last November, the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing excluded those who had received an interim payment—60 percent of their approved funding—from its waitlist. More than 53,000 elderly people are waiting for full funding but are simply not counted.

In total, there are some 300,000 elderly people waiting, waiting, waiting… to be assessed or to receive full funding for which they have been assessed.

"Four Corners" challenged Aged Care Minister Sam Rae, as he flatly denied there had been any change, saying "the waiting list has always been manufactured or calculated the way that it currently is."

Last year Albanese boasted that the introduction of the Support at Home scheme was "the greatest improvement in aged care in 30 years." In May, the first official report under Labor's scheme found that between November and March, patients waited on average 12 months to access care in a residential facility or support at home.

Demand for aged care services at home has increased dramatically since a 2021 royal commission report into the shocking mistreatment of elderly people in many residential aged care facilities.

Labor's Support at Home scheme is a cost-cutting response. On average, it costs the government more than $117,000 a year to subsidise a person in residential aged care, compared with less than $30,000 for care at home. Labor is keeping the home care costs down by using an automated "classification algorithm" to deny adequate services and by delaying funding even after approval.

Professor Kathy Eagar, an expert on health care algorithms, told "Four Corners" that crucial questions in the government's algorithm—about cognition, frailty and other health conditions—were considered too late in the decision process to have an impact.

She pointed out that the algorithm was statistically flawed because at one step in the decision process, a single point in a person's score could mean they gained or lost almost $40,000 a year in funding.

"They just throw you on the tip"

One of the cases documented by "Four Corners" was that of 96-year-old Audrey Staniland, who is blind due to macular degeneration and suffers from emphysema. She was first assessed for in-home aged care funding by a clinician more than a decade ago.

Her daughter applied for a reassessment late last year because her mother's privately contracted provider had increased its hourly rate for services such as personal care and social support from $90 to $115, meaning she had to cut back on care. Nevertheless, Labor's classification algorithm decided she should remain on the same level of funding she had received nearly 12 years earlier.

Staniland commented: "They just throw you on the tip. 'You've had your day, so you're no good to us anymore. You're a liability.' That's the attitude I get."

The Labor government had promised that the 350,000–370,000 people who were already receiving or had been approved for a home care package by September 2024 would be no worse off under the new system. Staniland's plight proves the opposite.

In the first five months of Labor's scheme, more than 1,000 people have applied for reviews. That is a six-fold increase from 2024–25. Of about 900 reviewed, only 207 were successful.

Minister Rae coldly told “Four Corners” that requests for review represented less than half a percent of all assessments. He called that a “relatively tolerable number.” But as many people have commented on social media, Audrey Staniland is not just a number.

Moreover, as other applicants showed “Four Corners,” the review process has become so difficult—with the burden on elderly people to disprove the algorithm result—that many give up trying.

Labor’s algorithm regime mirrors the previous Liberal-National Coalition government’s Robodebt scheme, in which people on income support were issued with automatically generated debt notices and forced to disprove the debts. That caused financial hardship and trauma to about 450,000 welfare recipients, some of whom committed suicide—a social crime for which no government minister has been held to account.

Another case highlighted by “Four Corners” was that of former ABC reporter Sean Dorney, who now suffers debilitating motor neurone disease (MND) and depends on his 69-year-old wife Pauline to lift him out of bed into a wheelchair each morning.

They have been waiting for more than eight months for a reassessment of his home-care budget of about $65,500 a year. This only covers six hours of care a week because he needs two carers at a time. The carers come three mornings a week for two hours to shower, dress and feed him. The rest of the time he is completely dependent on his wife.

With typical hypocrisy, the government announced earlier this year that people with MND would be classified as “urgent” and receive the Support at Home funding they had been approved for within a month. However, people with MND are not fast-tracked for assessment, which has left Dorney waiting.

Asked why someone like Dorney would be waiting eight months, far longer than the official median wait time for assessments of 36 days, Rae brushed off the question, vaguely declaring it could be due to “geographic distribution and availability of assessors.”

The interminable waiting extends beyond the elderly needing services in home to those desperate to obtain a place in nursing homes.

“Four Corners” found that there are close to 3,000 “stranded” patients in public hospitals around the country, too unwell to go home, at least without an adequate support package, but unable to secure a nursing home bed. The program showed that in South Australia some patients are being housed on two floors of a hotel in Adelaide, the state capital.

The Department of Health and Ageing estimates that Australia needs 10,400 new aged care beds per year. In 2024–25, only 802 beds were added. This year the Albanese government said it had committed to investing $1.7 billion to incentivise the corporate construction of up to 5,000 new residential aged care beds a year across the country. That is less than half the need.

Even that measure is being funded by stripping people aged over 65 of a private health insurance rebate, saving the government $11 billion in just over a decade.

A profit-driven crisis

What “Four Corners” did not explain is that Labor’s Support at Home scheme is a more punitive version of the previous Gillard Labor government’s Home Care Packages program, announced in 2012. It shifted the sector from a mixture of government-funded services to a so-called Consumer Directed Care model.

This is a voucher-style system where participants, including the most frail, poor and vulnerable, must individually purchase services from private providers. By its very nature, this turns aged care services into profit-driven financial transactions.

Support at Home continues the voucher model, but with extensive co-payments. Retirees now contribute up to 80 percent of the charges for essential living services such as cleaning, home maintenance, gardening, meals and social support, whereas many aged pensioners previously paid very little or nothing beyond a basic daily fee.

Like the outsourcing of services to private operators under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which the Gillard government also pioneered, the Support at Home program is predicated on making the market profitable enough to win corporate investment.

The home care sector reported a $558.1 million net profit before tax for the year ending March 2025, with the largest corporate providers achieving the highest profit margins of around 8.3 percent–8.6 percent.

Across the board, from the NDIS to aged care, Labor governments have led the way in transforming care services into profit-making markets. Under the slogan of “rights-based care,” they have created markets in which people have no right to necessary services.

In the case of the NDIS, Labor pushed through legislation this week, in partnership with the Coalition, to deny access to essential support services for more than 300,000 people with disabilities, including children—the biggest single cut to a social program in Australian history.

On both the NDIS and aged care, the Albanese government is throwing some of the most vulnerable members of society into deprivation and misery. It is cutting access to the limited privatised schemes that were first introduced by the Gillard government, while pouring billions of dollars into corporate hands and vast increases in military spending in preparation for war.