Safe visiting at care homes during COVID-19: Australian perspective

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Australia Timeline

31 Dec 2019
1st case reported by Wuhan officials

25 January 2020
First Australian cases reported (four incoming travellers from China)

27 Feb 2020
Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, activates the Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

1 March 2020
First Australian death from COVID-19 reported: a 78-year-old man who had been evacuated from the Diamond Princess cruise ship

On the 18th March 2020, the Federal Government declared a human biosecurity emergency and issued directives that allowed but restricted visitors to care homes:

- Visits limited to one visit per day, with a maximum of two visitors per visit
- Visits to take place in resident’s room, or in outdoor areas
- Visits to be kept brief
- Children aged 16 and under are discouraged from visiting
- Do not visit if sick or have respiratory problems
- Do not visit if have not had influenza vaccine

30 June 2020
7,834 cases, 104 deaths
Victorian Premier imposes local lockdowns

2 August 2020
State of disaster declared
Nightly curfew
Mandatory face coverings
Blanket bans reinstated

12 August 2020
22,127 cases, 352 deaths

19 October 2020
Restrictions significantly eased, with further easing on 27 October as case numbers dwindle
26 October 2020
Victoria records zero new cases and deaths for the first time since 9 June

1 November 2020
Australia records zero locally acquired COVID cases for the first time since 9 June

16 November 2020
A small outbreak of cases in South Australia, leads to re-impositions of restrictions and lockdown in that state. The outbreak is quickly controlled and restrictions end on 21 November.

The Australian Government extended mental health support for aged care residents.

18-31 December 2020
Northern Beaches cluster, reimposed restrictions
28,381 cases, 909 deaths.
Victoria, with 20,365 cases, 820 deaths,
NSW with 4,906 cases, 54 deaths.
Now

• Facilities:
  • Continue to postpone large group visits and external excursions.
  • Permit gatherings of residents in communal or outdoor areas.
  • Permit residents to leave the facility to attend small family gatherings.
  • Help residents stay connected with family and friends by phone and video calls.

• Spouses, other close relatives and social supports (including children) can visit. There is no limit to the number of hours they spend with their spouse/relative.

Case Study

BY BRIONY DOW

On the 18th March 2020, the Federal Government declared a human biosecurity emergency and issued directives that allowed but restricted visitors to care homes.

As a family member, I could not visit my mother at all.

This letter felt like it was punishing families for previous wrongdoing, it further stated:

“Over the week it has become apparent that our initial partial restrictions are not managing the risk of infection spread. Some visitors have been unwilling to comply with our requests and at times have been disrespectful and abusive to staff…”
I was able to visit my Mum after three months of restrictions. My Mum was especially glad to see me and it was good to visit every day for a fortnight.
Impact

WELLBEING

- Pre-COVID-19, people living in care homes commonly had symptoms of depression (reported as between 27% and 50%) and said they felt lonely (reported as between 35% and 40%) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013).

- Between 50-90% of residents have cognitive impairment or dementia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2012).

- Care homes may have limited access to technology (Siette et al. 2020), and residents may have varying comfort with, and acceptance of, technology for communication.
Unable to go out and all residents and units stayed at home. … The virus stopped me living normally.

The isolation. I cannot ever remember being so lonely.
Our thoughts

WHAT’S YOURS?

• Response from Australian Department of Health and aged care sector
  – Inadequate funding for additional staff to facilitate visits

• How to maintain quality of life?

• Some facilities acknowledged the success in keeping the virus out, but asked ‘at what cost?'

• Importance of family and friend visits
Core message

IS THIS NECESSARY?

Repeated localised visitor bans in response to tiny ‘outbreaks’ when there are very low levels of community transmission

Impact of restrictions on residents and families, staff time and resources required to manage safe visiting and government support to fund safe visiting
Thank you

@JSIETTE