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Older Australians left abandoned and confused by home care system

Consumer research centre releases latest report – *Choosing care: the difficulties of navigating home care.*

The report from Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC) draws on research undertaken in partnership with University of South Australia (UniSA) which surveyed 502 Home Care Package (HCP) recipients across metropolitan Australia in June and July last year.

“Older Australians are being abandoned by the system, often unable to access the necessary support to live happier, healthier lives at home” said CPRC CEO, Lauren Solomon.

Home Care Packages (HCPs) are meant to be providing older Australians with assistance cleaning, gardening, transporting and nursing so they can stay comfortably in their own homes for longer, however new research finds complexity and opacity a major barrier to many older people obtaining support.

60% of older people surveyed required assistance to identify and choose a HCP provider. This hidden burden most commonly fell to already busy healthcare professionals (40%) or family and friends (35%).

“What we have here is a system that has not been built for the people trying to access it. That burden is simply being shifted to family, friends and healthcare professionals as people try to navigate this bewildering and broken system.” Ms Solomon said.

“For those older people without adequate family or healthcare support, it’s unclear whether they would even be aware of the available Home Care Package support, let alone be able to access the system.”

While lack of supply of HCPs is clearly a big problem highlighted by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (ACRC), Ms Solomon warned that pouring more packages into a broken system alone will not improve outcomes.

“We need to fix the way older people and their carers are accessing the system. It needs to be easier, fairer and a lot more transparent.”

CPRC recommends the following changes:

- Fees, prices and service information need to be standardised and simplified so that people can compare their home care options (88% supported simpler, clearer information; 82% supported fees and charges simplification)
- Better support for healthcare professionals and carers, along with easier systems to connect older Australians with appropriate home care providers
- More transparency on the quality of different providers (80% wanted transparent information about the quality of different providers)

CPRC also agrees with the ACRC Interim Report that the My Aged Care website is not delivering the Productivity Commission’s original vision. The vision of older Australians seamlessly navigating the aged care system supported by a person-centred navigator. There is still no substitute for local knowledge and face-to-face interactions.

“We must design markets with people at the centre. Too often, older people and their experience of the market is just an afterthought.” said Ms Solomon.

Other key research findings include:

Reliance on carers and healthcare professionals to enter and navigate the HCP system

- A clear majority (60%) of those accessing the HCP system required assistance in selecting a provider. Most relied on a healthcare professional (40%) or family and friends (36%).

Confusion about plans, fees and packages

- Nearly a third of HCP recipients (32%) didn't know what level of package funding they received and 36% reported difficulties in understanding fees and charges.

Lack of transparency

- Concerningly, 39% of recipients reported not receiving a Care Plan. The Care Plan outlines the assessed needs of the individual, states the services the individual will receive to meet those needs, who will provide those services and when. It's a key document to enable older people to hold providers to account for the services they deliver.
- 80% reported wanting information about the quality of different providers, which is currently not available.

Information provided in complex ways through channels older people do not use

- Only 6.8% of respondents reported using information on the My Aged Care online portal, and only 5.8% online more generally to find and compare information about Home Care Packages.
- 44% of those surveyed reported not being confident when using the internet, the primary channel for information on Home Care Packages

The ACRC Interim Report was released on 31 October 2019 with recommendations being formulated for the final report over the coming months.

CPRC is an independent non-profit think-tank aiming to protect and improve the experiences and welfare of Australian consumers. This research forms part of a larger project on older Australian consumers that CPRC will be launching in the first half of 2020.

Lauren Solomon is available for interview on request, along with further findings from the report.

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About Consumer Policy Research Centre

An independent, non-profit, consumer think-tank established by the Victorian Government in 2016 and launched in 2017, Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC) undertakes consumer research independently and in partnership with others to inform evidence-based policy and business practice change. Working closely with policymakers, regulators, academia, industry and the community sector, our vision is to deliver a fair outcome for all consumers.