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Speech by Adam Graycar:

Opening comments at an arts and crafts display by
residents in nursing homes

delivered at the Fullarton Park Community Centre,
24th July, 1985.

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ARTS & CRAFTS DISPLAY BY

RESIDENTS IN NURSING HOMES

FULLARTON PARK COMMUNITY CENTRE

JULY 24, 1985

OPENING COMMENTS BY ADAM GRAYCAR

Thank you, Mr Chairman, for inviting me here today.

I am delighted to be here and to see around me some of the work of our senior citizens and indeed some of the people who created what we see before us.

In our society elderly people have a greater diversity of living arrangements than any other group - most live independently in their own homes - some with spouses, some alone, some with their children and grandchildren, some with relatives of their own age. Some live in boarding houses, retirement villages, hospitals, hostels, nursing homes - the spread really is very wide, and it is important to recognise the needs of people in different dwelling arrangements and the degree to which independence can be fostered and strengthened.

The Act of Parliament under which I work, the Commissioner for the Ageing Act, lists as one objective of the Commissioner " to achieve proper integration of the ageing within the total community thus ensuring that the skills and experience of the ageing are not lost to the community through social alienation".

What we see today is one aspect of skill and experience of the ageing being shared with the community in an attempt to achieve better integration.

When people live in nursing homes we often find limitations on the attempts to try to integrate these people into the wider

community. Often the dependencies which bring people into nursing home accommodation are used as a means of shunting people away - of keeping them out of sight - of reducing them to mere statistics occupying beds. As I said, what pleases me about today is that what we see before us is a departure from that scrap-heap mentality and an example of positive and active work - which has enriched and enhanced and which now is being shared with the community at large.

In Australia today, about 75,000 people live in nursing homes, about 5 per cent of our over 65 population. Basically there are three types of nursing homes. About 15% of nursing home residents in South Australia live in government nursing homes. About 40% in S.A. live in homes run by charitable and religious bodies. The remainder, 45%, live in private nursing homes.

As we look to the future we are faced with some very difficult decisions in how we develop care systems for our ageing population. Projections that have been done estimate that the 75,000 beds we now have in Australia will have to grow, over the next 15 years to somewhere between 110,000 and 130,000, an increase of between 46% and 75%. There will certainly be a lot of debate about two things - first, whether we should increase the number of nursing home beds or seek out alternative forms of accommodation and support, and second, how funding arrangements might work in the nursing home sphere.

Whatever the answer to the first question, we have a situation today in which the Commonwealth Government spends over \$900 million per year on nursing homes, and this figure is bound to grow. Obviously wanting to limit expenditure, the Commonwealth has recently made a harsh and insensitive decision which separates two states out from the rest, and creates a situation in which elderly people in those two states are severely disadvantaged. The two states are Victoria and South Australia, which interestingly, are the two states with the lowest number of nursing home beds per 1,000 elderly population.

Residents in private nursing homes receive a benefit, which when combined with 87.5 per cent of the pension, (plus supplementary assistance), covers the fee charged for 70% of the beds in private nursing homes. For the homes to increase their fees to reflect increasing costs, they must obtain approval from the Commonwealth.

In recognition of increasing cost structures, the Commonwealth increases nursing home benefits each November so as to keep 70% of the beds in private nursing homes within the reach of pensioners.

In this year's May mini-budget, the Commonwealth Government announced that it would freeze the benefit levels payable in Victoria and South Australia, and despite representations, the Commonwealth has shown no inclination towards flexibility in this

quite difficult situation. The benefits payable in Victoria and South Australia are higher than those in other states, and the Commonwealth says it cannot continue to maintain the inequity of higher benefit rates in these states.

What is the inequity which they are referring to? The inequity, they say, is that there are higher staffing standards, which the State Governments in Victoria and South Aust. have set. We have all heard horror stories of patient neglect when staffing levels are either inadequate or the staff are unqualified, but when State Governments try to inject a basic level of support, of professionalism, of decency, then those states are penalised, are told they are pampering the elderly. What nonsense - who says our elderly population doesn't deserve top quality care and support!

What we're really seeing is a wrangle between Commonwealth and State governments in which the Commonwealth is trying to pass costs onto the States - costs the States cannot and should not have to meet.

While they argue, those being hurt are the elderly pensioners in private nursing homes. A recent survey found that 87% of residents receive the full pension, and 59% of these are paying nursing home fees which are greater than the pension. While the Commonwealth says its policy is to have 70% of beds within the reach of the pensioners, it has on the one hand been

granting fee increases as a result of increasing costs, yet on the other, freezing benefits. The result is that by November 1985, less than 25% of beds in private nursing homes in S.A. will be within the reach of pensioners - fewer than 850 out of 3,500. By 1986 there will certainly be no beds within their reach. This goes right against the Commonwealth's own policy prescriptions.

While the arguments are, on the surface about the differences in levels of nursing care, the real issue, the hidden issue, the substantive issue, is that we are dealing with a major social welfare crisis. We are gathered today to witness fruits of the dedicated activity of some of our nursing home residents - activities showing that they have a contribution to make to our society, yet this action by the Commonwealth is designed to push them out to the margins of our society - to place them in an untenable financial situation - in a state of absolute, impoverished, isolated dependency.

When most of these people came to live in nursing homes their pensions plus the Commonwealth benefit paid their fees in full. Now, through arbitrary political action, through no fault of their own, their pensions and benefit no longer cover their fees. Where are they going to get the extra money from? Go out and get a job? Rob a bank? Beg it from relatives?

While many of us are working hard to limit dependency in our

society this retrograde move goes in the other direction. While many pensioners have children the last thing they want to do is to beg for their support. To do so is often humiliating, demeaning and demoralising. And perhaps those who are humiliated, demeaned and demoralised, the lucky ones who have children who can help out, are better off than those who have no family, or those who have family who are not in a position to provide that support. In my Office I have had numerous representations from distraught pensioners who support a pensioner relative. I am surprised and distressed to see that so many of the very poor support others who themselves are as poor.

To say, as does the Commonwealth, that this is an argument about staffing levels, is not to be on the level. This is an argument about the fundamental well being of pensioners in our society, who after a lifetime of independence, who, living on the pension as is their right, find that this does not buy them a comfortable and satisfactory place as they grow old. The Commonwealth's action is demeaning, belittling, and robbing of self-esteem.

There are many ways out of this impasse. There is a great deal to talk about. Dr Cornwall has said he is willing to meet with Dr Blewett and Senator Walsh to sort the matter out. The Commonwealth has shown no interest in talking about the issue.

The whole area of nursing home funding is under review and I am puzzled that this one issue is taken apart from the broad range

of review issues. I call on the Commonwealth to show some concern for the pensioner residents in private nursing homes, and to restore the benefit increase when it falls due next November.

If it does not, the sorts of activities which brought us here today, the lovely crafts which we all see, and the positive and energetic lifestyles of those who created them, could well be a thing of the past.