

The Ageless Question of Aged Care

Winner Year 11/12

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He asks me questions as he sits in the shower, spine hunched over beneath the globs of soap being lathered on by the hands of the morning nurse. By the door, almost outside of the room entirely, I stand and watch. I've been instructed to watch - every part of the process from the scrubbing of hair and skin to the feeble self-brushing of teeth. Small streams of water, slow and uncertain, make their way down the plastic frame of the commode, spooling and unspooling into ponds of wrinkles on his chest and knees. The questions he asks me are simple things - who I am, what I study and what I hope to be, but they keep us occupied against the strangeness of the situation. Though I answer as best as I can, there is an undeniable awkwardness, almost a sense of guilt, in the way the conversation flows; an intrusion on dignity by a work experience student. At last, with nothing more to say, I nod a goodbye and close the door.

The Australian aged care crisis, while hardly a new debate, is a painfully crucial one. Abuse, neglect, and a stark inadequacy of resources are, tragically, three of the most commonly reported realities in Australian nursing homes today. At Bupa's Seaforth facility, a 35-year-old worker was fired after footage emerged of him striking an 82-year-old resident with a shoe. The media was rightfully outraged - but the 'solution' was deeply inadequate.

What such examples reflect most starkly about the provision of aged care in Australia is not just a breach of adequate training and auditing processes in the healthcare industry, but rather a broader failure in the social and human connection between the young and old populations. We do not ask about the experiences of the individuals confronted with the frustrations and uncertainties of the aged care system simply because they have no relevance to the lives we know and carry out in the everyday. Until we ourselves, the youth, the working population, seek or are compelled to seek a permanent relationship with the older population, no number of Royal Commissions or surface-level policy changes will be able to effect lasting change. Fundamentally, the question of how our age care system can be repaired is a question of how (or in fact whether) our multifaceted society can learn to develop a genuine connection with some of its most vulnerable members.

In China, conversely, where my grandparents reside, the concept of nursing homes is a seemingly bizarre idea. Within the heavily family-oriented culture, there is a strong focus on home-based care, with the government plan for aged care referred to as 'Plan 9073' - 90% home-based care by relatives or casual workers, 7% low-level institutional care, and only the final 3% specialised residential care. In recent times, Australia too has begun to shift its concentration to greater support for home care packages.

But how might this work? Let's act it out.

Seventy years on, I'm waiting for the first students to arrive. Conscripted by the national gap-year aged care program, they will be my team, my community, helping me to clean, shower, and eat.

Right now, the sun gleams through the window, bathing the room in a brilliant golden glow. It is bright and polished at the same time; caressing and fierce; piercing then gone. Young and renewed every morning, yet still so inexplicably old.

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