

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**Reaffirmation of aged care visit guidelines must bring an end to insensitive restrictions**

Today's National Cabinet's reaffirmation that residential aged care providers should not restrict family visit access to residential aged care beyond the existing advice of National Cabinet has been strongly welcomed by the peak consumer organisations representing older Australians.

The announcement must pave the way for rolling back the excessive, inflexible and inhumane lockdown measures that a minority of aged care facilities have implemented which have been harmful to the health and wellbeing of aged care residents and their families. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's speech carried a "strong reminder that the National Cabinet decision was not to shut people off" and a desire for "as many freedoms to be extended to residents in facilities as possible."

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Australia, Older Persons Advocacy Network (OPAN), National Seniors Australia and Dementia Australia wrote to National Cabinet on 8 April seeking a nationally consistent approach by all aged care providers.

These arrangements under the existing "care and support" exemption must be implemented consistently to include end-of-life situations and to ensure continued access for a family member's involvement in providing care and support for a resident where there was a clearly established pattern before COVID-19 (e.g. assisting a resident with their meals; and/or with essential behaviour management). The consumer advocates also supported compassionate grounds by mutual agreement with a facility.

The four consumer organisations express their full support for all visitors entering aged care to be required to have a flu vaccination, have their temperature checked at the front door, to fully comply with all hygiene requirements and for visitors to remain only in the room of their loved ones.

COTA, OPAN, National Seniors and Dementia Australia have all been deeply concerned by the large numbers of reports each has received about aged care facilities enforcing restrictions that were inflexible and insensitive to the needs of residents and did not treat the people in their care, and their families, with dignity and respect, as required by the Aged Care Standards.

"The reaffirmation of a sensible balance to the national guidelines on aged care provides stronger clarity on the need for aged care providers to implement them compassionately and with full consideration of the unique needs of the people in their care," said COTA Chief Executive Ian Yates.

"Compassionate access, especially where there is a long held pattern of people providing care and support to their loved one in aged care must be permitted. This is particularly so where it is crucial to the person's health and wellbeing, or in end of life situations. We have heard too many stories of family barred from seeing their loved ones at the end of their lives. There is no reason why such visits should not continue with the same stringent health and screening measures as providers currently have in place for their staff."

National Seniors CEO Professor John McCallum said, "Exclusion of family visitors at the end of life of residents may remove a relatively minor risk for service providers but it is simply inhumane and causes long term distress.

"It is already clear that good providers can manage the risk of allowing families to say goodbye to a loved one by controlled visiting. This should be the norm across aged care."



OPAN CEO Craig Gear said, “A balance must be struck between keeping older people safe from the virus, and keeping their health and wellbeing strong with social and mental support.

“Social isolation, loneliness and lack of access to services will cause a second wave of consequences and hit the public health system hard.”

Maree McCabe, CEO of Dementia Australia, said “Unexpected changes to routine can have a dramatic impact on the mental health and wellbeing of a person living with dementia. If they are missing seeing familiar faces or no longer engaging in regular activities, they may become restless and distressed.

“Depending on the progression of the disease they may not understand why the changes are happening or may not recall why a loved one cannot visit as often.

“Including families in the care of their loved one in residential aged care will provide comfort to the person living with dementia and the families will have more peace of mind.

“The caring contribution made by visiting family members often eases the load of the day to day staff thereby for the person with dementia, reducing feelings of loneliness, stress and anxiety. This in turn perhaps avoids situations escalating that could put them, other residents and staff at risk.”

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