



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT,  
EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

**Reference: Issues specific to older workers seeking employment, or  
establishing a business, following unemployment**

THURSDAY, 21 OCTOBER 1999

CANBERRA

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE**  
**RELATIONS**

**Thursday, 21 October 1999**

**Members:** Dr Nelson (*Chair*), Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Dr Emerson, Ms Gambaro, Mrs Gash, Ms Gillard, Mr Katter, Mr Sawford and Mr Wilkie

**Members in attendance:** Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Ms Gambaro, Mrs Gash, Ms Gillard, Dr Nelson and Mr Wilkie

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

Inquire into and report on the social, economic and industrial issues specific to workers over 45 years of age seeking employment, or establishing a business, following unemployment.

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**Committee met at 9.08 a.m.**

**HOGG, Ms Carolyn, General Manager, Gateway, Centrelink**

**MUDIE, Ms Virginia, National Manager, Employment Services, Centrelink**

**POWELL, Mr David, Accounts Manager, Business Development Unit, Employment Services, Centrelink**

**VARDON, Ms Suzanne Sharon, Chief Executive Officer, Centrelink**

**WIGHTMAN, Mr Peter, Manager, Employment Allowances, Centrelink**

**CHAIR**—I welcome the representatives of Centrelink who are here today to give evidence. Thank you for being prepared to come to speak to us today about this important inquiry. I would remind you that these proceedings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings in the House itself. The deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public. But if at any stage there is anything that you wish to give in camera, please ask to do so.

Just introducing my colleagues: at the far end of the table on your side is Ms Joanna Gash, the member for Gilmore, a government held seat on the south coast of New South Wales; at the far end is Mr Kerry Bartlett, the member for Macquarie which covers the Blue Mountains, also for the government; Ms Teresa Gambaro is the Liberal member for Petrie in metropolitan Brisbane; at the far end is Mr Kim Wilkie, the Labor member for Swan in metropolitan Perth; Ms Julia Gillard is the Labor member for Lalor in Victoria; and I represent a metropolitan seat for the government in Sydney.

Perhaps, Sue, you could give us an overview of this issue, at least as Centrelink sees it. I am sure that you have been following the *Hansard* of hearings and seen submissions. In anticipation of our asking you questions about those things, perhaps you might like to address some of the issues that have been raised in the course of the inquiry.

**Ms Vardon**—Certainly. We have prepared a quick summary of Centrelink and our obligations on behalf of the client departments for whom we provide services particularly to job seekers. I have taken each of the summary items that were presented as a result of the review of the *Hansard* and, in anticipation of this inquiry, I called for submissions from all over the country to be able to give you a snapshot of all the different things we are doing around Australia. Rather than give you the snapshot word for word, I thought I would give you a few examples. Then, if the committee is interested, I would be happy to table for you—not today because we do not have it nicely typed—that snapshot of things around Australia.

Centrelink is a statutory authority. It was established by the Commonwealth government and proclaimed on 1 July 1997. It was created as a one-stop shop, particularly in the first instance as a single point of registration for employment assistance and income support. It was launched parallel to the creation of the Job Network. Centrelink became the gateway to

the Job Network and the carrier of new initiatives, such as Work for the Dole. Centrelink has subsequently added to the concept of the one-stop shop a whole lot of other services. We now deliver 70 or so products and services for other government agencies, nine of which are Commonwealth, and all the state and territory housing authorities. Centrelink has 1,000 locations around Australia, 301 customer service centres, 23 call centres, more than 34 specialist centres, 140 visiting services and 260 rural agents. So we are a very widely distributed organisation.

If we look at people who are mature age workers, we have approximately 180,000 Newstart allowance recipients aged over 45 in Australia, and there are 30,000 mature age allowees, being people who are over 60. In 1996, there were 170,500 Newstart allowees. The figure stayed flat for about three years and it has gone up 10,000 in the last year. One of the theories is that we have an ageing population. That probably is the reason and, even though it needs scientific analysis, that would be our presentation to you today.

The significant service for job seekers is delivered through what we call a customer service centre. That is the physical site of our one-stop shop. Those customer service centres connect to a large number of employment agencies and community activities to deliver services for older people as well as for people in general. I will just talk about some of the things we do for the 45-year-old-plus group. Firstly, they have access to the full range of support that is accessed through Centrelink. All our customers can see or be referred to social workers and occupational psychologists who provide extended advice and other referral options on personal issues of concern to mature age job seekers. I will talk more about that later.

When a person comes to us, they have an interview; they go to an information seminar to discover what their opportunities are; we put them through a test to work out the level of help they will get from the Job Network; and then we refer them to a list of Job Network providers, not specifically to any one. The emphasis of the referral is that people have a choice about which service they may choose. We do not actually refer directly. Some of our customer service centres have gone into great depth to deliver personalised service and are particularly very sensitive to people who are older than normal who are suffering the stress people feel when suddenly unemployed. We have local financial information service officers in our organisation who provide information about finances. I will talk about that a little later also.

Over the last two years, we have made a significant change to our service delivery. People used to come particularly to the old Social Security and to the CES and be treated differently every time. We have been able to create a personalised service so that a known person becomes someone's contact inside our organisation. That has made a significant difference to the relationship that people have with our organisation. That person is known as a one-to-one contact person. They look after the job seeker until such time as the job seeker has got some sort of satisfactory plan for themselves.

Centrelink refers mature age job seekers to employment programs. Jobsearch training and intensive assistance are available for job seekers of work force age. Eligibility for these programs is determined by the job seeker classification instrument—and I know that has been the subject of discussion. We take into account certain factors with that instrument,

including age and the weighting assigned to it which has been given to us by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. Programs such as self-employment development and the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme can be more suited to mature job seekers seeking self-employment opportunities.

Centrelink also offers job seekers greater options for voluntary work; certainly, there is plenty more scope for mature job seekers in these activities—and I would like to talk more about that too. We have found voluntary work to be very good for older people; it is certainly of help to those who have lost self-confidence. Also, it maintains people's skills while they are looking for work. Many people—and we have examples of this—have gone from voluntary work to paid work. In the community, Centrelink people are being encouraged to do a lot more reaching out than they have ever done before. Essentially, we are moving from an inbound government department to a government department or agency that participates in its community.

Staff from our Nowra customer service centre are regular participants in the Shoalhaven Area Consultative Committee for the Job Network. The committee is currently sponsoring a mature age placement adviser and also offering skills audits, and Centrelink staff are providing mature age customers with information to access this service. As another example of building partnerships in the community, customer service centres in the Hunter are working with a mature workers program being provided in their locality. A lot of our people in New South Wales connect to the mature workers program, and that is seen as a very successful program. The committee might want to find out more about it. It certainly has generated great enthusiasm among our New South Wales people.

We participated last year in a survey that was done by the Belconnen Employment Solutions Taskforce, BEST, and Re-employ Active Mature People, REAMP. They surveyed the mature age unemployed. The document produced from that survey was presented by the ACT Chief Minister to the Legislative Assembly which, along with other influences, resulted in the ACT government's Restart program—and I will give that to you because you would probably know about it. As result of that, our staff at Belconnen were briefed to be more sensitive to the needs of the mature age unemployed person.

We work very hard to build relationships with Job Network providers. We also work with those who want to specialise, particularly those who want to specialise with mature age people. We do a lot of referrals to TAFE courses. In Liverpool, there is a Career Education for Women program that we refer a lot of people to. Also, there are plenty of examples of TAFE courses around Australia which are targeted to the older job seeker.

One of the biggest issues for us is opportunities that come from volunteering. I know that has been controversial from time to time. But we would say that for older age people it has been very successful. We mostly refer to Volunteering Australia or the local Citizens Advice Bureau, but we also refer to volunteer emergency service options and so on. We have been working with the Vietnamese Community Association in Victoria and Adult Multicultural Education Services in Victoria to organise training programs for mature age people in welfare work. That has been very successful.

I will now address some of the concerns that have been put before you. We notice that comments have been made about poor knowledge of, and reluctance to use, Centrelink services. Also, witnesses have complained about problems people have in approaching Centrelink. Our people around Australia are quite unanimous in saying that mature age workers certainly have great difficulty in going out and seeking help, particularly those who had been in work for a long time. They are embarrassed, and they often use up their assets significantly before coming to us. This means that often they are in pretty dire straits when they do come to us. The onus on us is to get to them beforehand. For that reason, we have done a number of things. We can always do more, but I would like at least to list some of the things we have done.

Firstly, we have changed the nature of our offices very dramatically. The committee might like to have a look at one, but they are very different from what they were before. We have taken out the high counters and opened up into what we call an extended open-office plan. We have put all of our staff into little comfortable desks. We have introduced a meet and greet policy. We do not call people up by numbers or have them queue up, if we can help it. We make appointments for people, and people can ring and make appointments through our call centres. With the call centres having had some bad press, you will be very pleased to know this: in the week 11 to 15 October, you could get through our employment line in 52.4 seconds. So there has been a great improvement in our organisation. People can ring in on the phone and make appointments now; they do not have to come in and stand anonymously in a big queue, waiting for someone in order to get help.

Inside our organisation, we work very hard at getting the queues down. We have blitzed our organisation with customer service orientation. Over 600 of our people have been customer service champions, trainers and quality trainers, and so on. All our staff have been trained to be much more responsive and receptive towards people. We still have a fair way to go, but we are making great progress in personalising our service. As we do not expect everyone to come into the office, even though we are making them more welcoming, we also do a lot of outreach. There was a commentary about our work with BHP. Whenever a company or business of more than 15 people retrenches, they have to tell us.

**CHAIR**—How many people?

**Ms Vardon**—Fifteen; any business which retrenches more than 15 people has to tell us.

**Ms GILLARD**—What is the source of that obligation? It used to be an award obligation, but what is its source now?

**Ms Vardon**—It used to be an obligation that was imposed upon the CES; it now has been given to us.

**Ms GILLARD**—But is it an award obligation?

**Mr Wightman**—It is in the Workplace Relations Act.

**Ms GILLARD**—So it will not be post the second wave.

**Ms Vardon**—When we are informed that this is to occur, we mobilise. We go out and approach the company. We sit down and work out with them whether we need to provide financial or entitlement information. We will go out to those organisations. The best example is with the closure of BHP in Newcastle. We set up an office in BHP. We were open from 7.00 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. enabling us to cover all the shift workers. We were there for many weeks. We work very positively with both unions and companies; in fact, it is often the unions with whom we work most of all.

Some of our people have taken the initiative by going on radio. An example of that is one of our area support staff in South Australia who has a regular fortnightly spot on 5UV, a local radio station. They talk about issues that are likely to be of interest to mature age people, including options for employment. We go out to senior citizens groups. We have examples of that occurring in Casterton, Merino and Dartmoor in Victoria. We have 31 community service offices around Australia involved in outreach. In Sydney, for example, we go to mature age customers in hostels around the city.

In every single one of our offices, we have a set of self-help facilities which are very heavily used. We provide telephones on which people can ring employers. We have newspapers. We have personal computers where people can prepare their CVs. There is access to fax machines. I have been to a great many of our customer service centres and seen people of all ages going in and feeling quite comfortable sitting down and using these facilities. We get many compliments about how helpful these facilities are in helping people to get work.

We also help people to use the touch screens because many people are unfamiliar with them. Those touch screens open up access to employment throughout Australia. The touch screen can also be accessed through our web site. We have placed on our web site a lot of information for people who are unemployed. We are happy to table a dump of our web site, if you are interested. That also is something we are working on because a great many people access us through the web.

**Ms GILLARD**—Do you monitor the number of hits the web site gets?

**Ms Vardon**—Yes, we do. We have hundreds of thousands of hits. People also write to us directly through the Net in looking for individual service. We have 1,500 of those contacts a week. They are answered in Townsville. It is the one service that we are not promoting at this stage because to answer those inquiries we would need about 10,000 staff. So we are only using IT based solutions for self-help, not for direct communication between officers and customers. I am happy to pursue that, if you are interested.

We also have seminars for employment. When a person comes to us, we offer them the opportunity to sit in a seminar where they will hear about their obligations but also get to talk to other people about how to get work. Job Network providers come to those seminars, as do employers; and we are about to encourage more employers to come to them. Some of our officers have set up specialised seminars for people who are over 40; in that way, people who are in like circumstances can attend together. We think that is probably a growth area for us because it is more customer sensitive than sitting in a room with someone who is young and in quite a different position.



That has commenced in Bundaberg; we have a specialised 50-plus seminar there. Broome also has a seminar for long-term unemployed aged over 50. The seminar has guest speakers from service providers in Broome. The intent of the seminar is to see whether that group of people would like to form a support network. The Broome office is also targeting a local caravan park where there is a large number of unemployed 40-year-olds and over. We are looking at building up support groups in that caravan park in particular so that people can swap ideas on how to get work.

We notice also that comments were made about Centrelink staff. I would say two things here. First, almost half of our network staff are over 40 years of age—46.1 per cent. Interestingly enough, that causes us a problem because we have to recruit some young ones. But, in a sense, we are not all youthful in our organisation. The most important thing we have done relates to people who may be feeling uncomfortable in that a young person is looking after them. If, after having been allocated their one-to-one contact person—that is, their known person—in our organisation, they feel uncomfortable, they are entitled to seek another person who is of a more mature age. That is perfectly acceptable in our organisation. It is not taken as an insult to the customer service officer if you ask for someone of a different age group.

**CHAIR**—I presume that those customer service officers cover the full age range.

**Ms Vardon**—Yes, they do.

**CHAIR**—So they might be as young as 20, or in their late teens—

**Ms Vardon**—They might be.

**CHAIR**—right through to their mid-sixties.

**Ms Vardon**—We do not have very many under 25, unfortunately—although we are 10 years younger than the rest of the Public Service. Interestingly enough, the place where we recruit the most is in the call centres. Those people are often more mature people, women who have life experience. I go and speak to many of the new recruits and I have noticed how mature they are. In fact, I was so concerned about how mature they were, I said, ‘Where are the young people?’ But that is actually a good thing for this particular group.

**CHAIR**—One criticism that was given in evidence was that people at the age of 50 feel demeaned in going and talking to a 20-year-old or thereabouts. But you have said that, if there is any discomfort, they can request someone else—and I know that some of them would do so aggressively. Is it pointed out to them, by the way, that they do have that option?

**Ms Vardon**—The one-to-one contact is an initiative which started last year and is rolling out through our organisation. For us, it is a new way of delivering service and it will take a while for everybody to understand who their contact person is. I am not sure whether they are told every single time that they can, but certainly they would be if they were showing discomfort, I will have to check on that. There is probably a variable response to that.

**CHAIR**—That might be helpful. Mind you, some of our witnesses have been very angry with everyone and everything, and that is understandable. But perhaps you might give some thought to at least saying to these people, ‘Look, if you’re not comfortable dealing with me, please feel free to say so.’

**Ms Vardon**—It might be in our customer charter.

**Ms Mudie**—That is part of the new roll-out as well.

**Ms Vardon**—Thank you. We will take that on board. I have other examples where members of our staff have written in and said, ‘Being over 40 myself, I’m very conscious of serving our mature unemployed clients, especially those who are over 40.’ This is a quote from Bondi: ‘Mature age unemployed are often quite upset and embarrassed at attending a Centrelink office; many have already sold off all their assets to survive before approaching Centrelink and are therefore in hardship when they apply for benefits.’ It goes on to state, ‘The customer service officers understand that they need to be attentive to all our customers, but they usually are more careful and understanding with mature age people.’ That is a voluntary quote from Bondi, not in relation to any evidence that has been given to this committee. In Queensland they say the same thing. This is a quote from an older customer, from Geelong: ‘I found the staff here to be helpful beyond my expectations—no put-down, no ridicule; it gives me a new confidence to aim higher in my efforts to find work.’

Of course, there will be some people who feel uncomfortable and others who feel comfortable. Our goal in life is to make everybody feel comfortable, and we have to make sure that we do that.

**Mr WILKIE**—What specific training do you provide to counter people to deal with mature age unemployed? A common thread that seems to be coming through is that sometimes people feel there is little or no understanding from the people they are dealing with. Often they think they are being spoken down to. I think it is a perception rather than a reality, but I am wondering what training you provide.

**Ms Vardon**—There is a lot of training. Someone did a survey of Commonwealth agencies in the last couple of years and we were found to be the most trained. Let me tell you of the value creation workshops, of which we are extremely proud. Every office takes 15 staff and 15 customers; the customers talk for half a day and our staff are only allowed to listen. This has made a huge impact because the staff has to listen to what people really think about coming into the organisation. As a first point, that really opened up people’s minds. With 10,000 people having been through that 15-on-15 process, it really has been very significant in opening up the minds of our staff to how people feel when coming into our place. Our customers speak very strongly in those meetings. Those meetings are properly monitored, so customers feel comfortable about doing so; people from outside have come in and trained our people in how to run them.

We have had customer service training office by office. We are introducing a customer service certificate, which is being trialled at Box Hill TAFE in Victoria. That certificate is about to be released. We are introducing some very specialised training for the employment team people; that is being rolled out now. We are also using our satellite television station to

roll out a series of training programs via an interactive television exercise that starts next year. So constant training is very much a part of our commitment to improving services.

**Mrs GASH**—Having been a great criticiser of Centrelink in the past—

**CHAIR**—A long time ago.

**Mrs GASH**—a long time ago, I would congratulate you.

**Ms Vardon**—We are only 2½ years old.

**Mrs GASH**—No, prior to that and in the changeover period a lot of hassles occurred, as you would be well aware.

**Ms Vardon**—Yes.

**Mrs GASH**—Congratulations to you for weeding out those people who really did not want to be at Centrelink. I think that is the best move you have ever made, certainly in our particular area. I now have a concern. I listened to your saying that it was part of the criteria of the workplace agreement, or whatever it was, that companies have to notify you about retrenchment. I have had a retrenchment of 40 people from Joy Manufacturing at Moss Vale in the southern part of my electorate. How do you police that? How do you help these people who, by the way, are all over the age of 40 and 45?

**Mr Wightman**—We have on our intranet a notification button, and anyone in Centrelink can fill that notification out. The way employers contact us varies. They will talk to the local Centrelink office or someone else whom they know, or whatever. Anyone can record that retrenchment and then it comes to us in national support. We then refer it back to the relevant area and office. The retrenchment of the Joy Manufacturing workers was notified to the local office.

**Mrs GASH**—It was done?

**Mr Wightman**—Yes. The local office then filled out the notification form and sent it to us. But that office was already launching our outreach program. We do that for all retrenchments. We make contact with the employer or the receiver or the administrator and the union and the workers there. We make sure that everyone knows of their entitlement for Centrelink payment. Often we send out the manager of the employment team or the office manager, but certainly the financial information service officer goes.

We offer to conduct seminars and book a time at which such seminars can be held on site, or we hold them at a community hall or back at the office. Those seminars are very important because at them we tell people, if they are being retrenched, about their redundancy payments and how they will affect their eligibility for Newstart allowance and other Centrelink payments. We try to get out and get ourselves involved straight away so that we can quash any rumours, such as ‘You’ve got to spend your money first,’ or ‘Even though you’re not going to be paid your money because the company is insolvent, you’ll not

get benefits until that money is paid.’ We try to let them know that they are eligible right from the start.

The problem we have with a lot of these retrenchments is that people have worked for these companies for a long time and never really been to Centrelink, so there is no great understanding of what their entitlement is. We go out there straight away to set them at ease. We will book them in for appointments, give them literature and hold seminars. In that way, we inform everyone.

**Mrs GASH**—That is the initial period of time. Do you do a follow-up in six months time? How do you watch the progress of those people?

**Mr Wightman**—People then come onto our books and start going through the system. They make their claim, they are granted payment, then the job seeker classification instrument is applied. They may or may not be eligible for assistance directly at that time. Certainly people go through the information seminar, they are issued with a job seeker diary and we set them on their way in looking for work.

**Mrs GASH**—For mature people, that job seeker diary is very degrading. Has there been any proposal to do away with it?

**Ms Vardon**—We have the capacity to reduce the activities of the older people. Who is the expert on that?

**Mr Wightman**—I am. The job seeker diary is issued to all new claimants for Newstart allowance, and that has to be filled out for the first 10 weeks on payment. It is a means of ensuring that job seekers are actively looking for work.

**Mrs GASH**—My question was: is there any proposal to reassess that situation?

**CHAIR**—That is a government policy area.

**Mrs GASH**—I know that. I am just wondering whether anything has come up about it.

**Mr Wightman**—We redesigned the job seeker diary sometime ago and we are redesigning it again. In the second redesign, we did market research on it and put a lot of job hints in it about looking for work, a resume, presenting yourself at interviews, whatever, because we wanted to make that a proactive requirement. In our claim processing and our seminar, we stress the positives of the job seeker diary. We do not see it as a punitive measure. It is really helping us to ensure that people are actively looking for work when they are newly unemployed, because that is the best time in which to get a job.

**Ms Hogg**—The question about more or less or even having a job seeker diary is really one for the Department of Family and Community Services. That is a policy that we administer on behalf of them.

**Mrs GASH**—I understand that.

**CHAIR**—We understand that. It is like the tax office administering policy. Can I just be clear about this? There is a requirement in the Commonwealth Workplace Relations Act that, if you are making 15 or more employees redundant, you must notify Centrelink.

**Mr Wightman**—It stems from previously having to notify the CES. That was carried over with the Workplace Relations Act.

**Ms GILLARD**—But is it in the act or—this is my recollection and it might be a bit out of date now—is it one of the standard provisions stemming from the termination, change and redundancy case, and that led to its being inserted into awards dealing with redundancy standards, including the obligation on employers to notify the then CES, now Centrelink? One of the forward issues is that, as you strip out allowable matters from awards, it will cease to be an allowable matter, meaning that it will not be an award obligation. Is that right, or wouldn't you know?

**Mr Wightman**—No, I think you lost me there in the detail. Certainly I can comment that it is not widely known among employers that they have to do that and they choose the method of notifying. Because we have our intranet spread throughout all our sites, that works. But it is quite varied with their having to seek out their local office, or whatever.

**CHAIR**—It is our view and likely to be a part of our report, I suspect, that all employers should have this obligation placed upon them.

**Ms GAMBARO**—With the process of reporting of people's earnings from part-time and casual work, a number of witnesses have told us that there is a disincentive both to earn the money and to declare the income. In many cases their benefits are affected and cut before they receive any payment from the employer. Is there some method by which this can be got around? It is acting as a disincentive, and I hear about it just as do others who are here. People comment on their difficulties in getting work and the dip that they have to go through. How do earnings credit schemes operate; have you looked at this area? Do you have any suggestions to offer?

**Mr Wightman**—The earnings credit scheme was abolished some time ago.

**Ms GAMBARO**—Did it operate well?

**Mr Wightman**—Certainly with the figures, there was a drop in people reporting casual earnings when the earnings credit was abolished a couple of years ago. So it certainly is an incentive for people to bank up their earnings so that they are not affected there.

Then there is the issue that you raised about people not being paid but their income support being reduced prior to receiving the money because they have to declare their earnings when they are earned, not when they are paid. There is the special employment advance which is currently before parliament. This will overcome that because one of its conditions is that you are working, and your allowance will be significantly reduced because you are working, but you have not been paid. That will allow us to advance pay people so that we can keep them cashed up.

**Ms GAMBARO**—I will just expand on that. I think at one of the hearings we had a contractor or a consultant who again raised this; he or she was not a regular wage earner. Will those people be taken into account as well? Say that I do some consulting work and I do not get paid, as is the case, for four, five, six weeks sometimes.

**Mr Wightman**—Yes. There are two criteria for the special employment advance. One is that you may be leaving income support for a job and you need expenses to get you that job—perhaps for a weekly bus ticket and some new clothes, or something like that. The other is that you will be earning but you will not be paid for sometime and, therefore, you will be financially disadvantaged. You can then call for an advance of up to \$500 of your income support. That may address those issues.

**CHAIR**—With our moving into cash accounting with the new tax system for businesses, it just seems that we could do some cash accounting in this area too. That is the way I would look at it.

**Mr Wightman**—That is an issue for FACS with the way the income test works.

**CHAIR**—We will find out what the exact status of the legislation is at the moment.

**Mr BARTLETT**—There seem to have been some problems—I know that some of them are being ironed out—with the interface between Centrelink and the Job Network providers particularly. For instance, a tardiness in the referral process and not enough referrals is one issue. Then there is the inflexibility and, dare I say, the inaccuracy of the JSCI with people who ought to have been categorised as threes having been categorised as twos, and people who ought to have been twos having been classified as ones because they do not fit the need criteria. But really there are significant aspects of disadvantage that make it very difficult for them to get work. That is a problem. Many of our witnesses have argued for much earlier access or instant access to the FLEX 2 or FLEX 3 category, but in many cases they have been precluded from that. Is this a common complaint that you are getting? Is this issue being reviewed? Are we planning any changes?

**Ms Vardon**—I will talk about the first point first. When the Job Network scheme was created and Centrelink was the gateway, it took Australia a while to understand what was happening. I think though that now there has been a general sorting out, certainly in the industry and mostly at the local level, about what our role is and what the job provider's role is. We have always met the targets that have been given to us from DEETYA and then DEWRSB.

One issue of concern has been that we refer a person to a list, not to a particular site, and people choose. If the Salvation Army or Employment National have good reputations in certain areas, they are more likely to get those referrals, and somebody might be left out.

**Ms Hogg**—Location also is important. Location is the key factor.

**Ms Vardon**—Location is important. Some people put themselves very close to a Centrelink office, and others put themselves two bus stops away. That obviously affects the flow. But we now are contracted to fill all the job providers to a level, and that is happening.

All around Australia there are much better relations between ourselves and the Job Network providers. In fact, a recent study gave us a pretty good tick on that. Just about all of our offices—I found one that did not—have a designated person who liaises with the Job Network providers. The Job Network providers are invited to the seminars I spoke of earlier. Some of our officers have breakfast with Job Network providers. Generally we are building up a much stronger relationship with them than existed before. People are feeling a bit more comfortable about how it all fits in.

**Ms Hogg**—I would say two things. In the early days of the inception of Centrelink and the Job Network, we were put under extreme pressure because the old market closed down on one day and Job Network opened on the next day. Job seekers who were with the old market had an option—it was voluntary—to move to the new market, and there were hundreds of thousands of people who did not volunteer to move to the new Job Network. Therefore, because we had a commercial operation that was expecting customers and lots of customers on day one, we had to make extreme efforts to get people to move from that old market into the new one. That led to the pressure and the criticism of Centrelink being tardy and not supplying the Job Network. It took us two or three months to build up that market again by getting customers back into the new market. Once we overcame that, it became much more plain sailing.

We have got the Job Network people up to a capacity that, in fact, we do not move under. Currently, in relation to their contracted places, I think we have them at about 95 per cent full. That now changes very, very little—either one point up or one point down from that level. But that was the reason that in the very early days we were under extreme pressure to fill that market.

**Ms Vardon**—Then there are those who some feel are inappropriately placed in some employment agencies. Normally they talk to our local managers, the employment service managers or the employment service contract person. They talk about how we can move them to a more satisfactory place. People do not have to be locked into one Job Network provider; they can have two or three.

**Mr BARTLETT**—What about the issue of the JSCI?

**Ms Vardon**—The JSCI is a test which we administer on behalf the department or DEWRSB, and it is constantly being looked at.

**Mr Powell**—We have put in place a range of training packages for our staff. There are a couple of points to note in terms of the information that a job seeker provides. A lot of that information is considered sensitive and personal, and providing it is discretionary. We notice that in some of our customers there is a reluctance to provide some information at first contact with Centrelink. In some instances, this can lead to misclassification.

**Ms Vardon**—I will give an example. Many people who have a mental illness are reluctant to say they have one. That perhaps is the most common problem we have in the first round.

**Mr Powell**—Our training packages are designed around the fact that we are trying to develop a rapport in the relationship with the job seeker to establish a degree of trust; our one-to-one relationship over time can build on that. We are trying to capture the information as accurately as possible. DEWRSB recognise that the job seeker classification is a classification tool; it is not an assessment tool. We are trying to get a snapshot of where the customer is.

**Mr BARTLETT**—Is there any scope for flexibility if someone is classified in one category but clearly, intuitively, you would suspect was in need of a greater level of assistance?

**Mr Powell**—Absolutely.

**Mr BARTLETT**—So that flexibility is there?

**Mr Powell**—They are the sorts of things that DEWRSB are looking at in terms of the sorts of discretionary powers that might be applied. That is something which at the moment DEWRSB are looking at, and you may wish to take that up with them.

**Ms Hogg**—If we also sense there are deeper issues with a particular job seeker, our one-to-one contact officer, who by and large is not a professional person, will then refer to one of our professional officers. We have a number of options within the assessment process to get different officers—social workers or, indeed, often occupational psychologists—to apply more tests than the JSCI. That then gets into the area, particularly with people who have trauma syndromes and things like that, of opening up with a professional officer; they, in fact, complete the JSCI. So there are a number of opportunities within the Centrelink environment for the JSCI to be completed. The first interview is by no means the end of the story. Indeed, the first point of our dealing with a customer is not the end of the story. We can reassess or reapply the JSCI as many times as we like. We are contracted to apply it at certain points, but it is our prerogative to apply it at any point where we feel that potentially there are other issues that have not been taken into account.

**Ms Mudie**—I think that picks up the point that was being talked of: the dilemma in that a person might be reluctant to advise Centrelink that they have particular difficulties. They may then go to a Job Network provider and, through discussion, that provider may find they do have a problem that takes them from a FLEX 1 to a FLEX 2. Then they would have to come back to Centrelink to go through a process of seeing an occupational psychologist.

**Mr BARTLETT**—That scenario is certainly one that I have experienced in my electorate where there has been disagreement initially between the Job Network provider and Centrelink in terms of the accuracy of the assessment. What of the other question of immediate access to more intensive assistance, to FLEX 2 and FLEX 3?

**Ms Mudie**—That is determined by the JSCI classification instrument.

**CHAIR**—This is an important issue because, as you would be aware, the unemployment rate generally for people in this age group is lower but the long-term unemployment rate is higher; the longer they are unemployed, the more difficult it is to get them a job. One of the



thematic suggestions that has been put to us is that they ought to be able to access FLEX 2 and FLEX 3 earlier—possibly as early as six months. That obviously has budgetary implications apart from anything else. Do you have a view about this?

**Ms Mudie**—There is one thing you might find worth discussing with some of the Job Network members. Some of them have said to me that the situation is that they are referred to the Job Network member; they get an up-front payment to give them a FLEX 1 classification. One of the problems they find is that they have to have the mature age workers in a job for 13 weeks. That is a particular difficulty because they might not be able to get 13 weeks of continuous employment for that person, and so they will sit. However, potentially if you had a combination of voluntary work, some casual work and some part-time work, that might help alleviate that situation.

**CHAIR**—But after three months should your officers, for example, have the ability to say, ‘Look, this guy is a challenge and ought to be going onto FLEX 3’? Do we need a system like that?

**Mr Powell**—With the way the system works at the moment, the Jobsearch training people are eligible for that assistance at three months. For intensive assistance, it is the application of the JSCI that determines their access. So they can access intensive assistance from day one if their score is sufficient to get over the threshold. What the JSCI does, if you like, is put people onto a continuum of relative need.

**Ms Hogg**—The other thing about longevity is that there are automatic points attributed to the job seeker after certain periods. Even if we do not reapply the JSCI, if the job seeker becomes longer and longer term unemployed, the process in the computer system adds points at different times. The longer people stay unemployed, the more the points are adding up. I think it is at three, six, nine and 12 months that they get additional points. They may well fall over the line at that point. If they fall over the line at that point or if they are very close, we get presented with their name. The process is completely automatic from then on in that they get a letter, they ring us and off they go to the Job Network. Even though we might not be looking at them personally, the system works in the background to make sure that the time factor is taken into account.

**CHAIR**—From your point of view, the current system is all right and does cater for individual need. Would that be a fair thing to say?

**Ms Hogg**—It would need to be looked at further. We hear some anecdotal issues from our staff. I think it is just the way the tool is directed. You will get a personal view from some Centrelink staff that all young people should go straight into Job Network; that, even though young people may be fairly well educated, et cetera, there should be immediate intervention to stop them from ever becoming long-term unemployed. So you have those various points of view. It is a policy issue as to whether they swing the tool to do those sorts of things. Lots of people have views about how it is applied and how it is targeted. But with the way it is targeted currently for the job it has to do, by and large, we say it is very difficult to try to work out one tool that will correctly work for everybody.

**Ms Mudie**—The tool does not allow for there to be the discretion to say, ‘What are the circumstances of this person?’ The tool will determine the score, the weighting.

**Mr BARTLETT**—It seems to me that a fundamental problem—I do not know how it is to be addressed—is the level of discretionary powers Centrelink ought to have vis-a-vis the degree of regulation through the legislation. I am sure that every member has examples of constituents who seem to fall through the cracks. Looking at their situation clearly, there is need that somehow has to be addressed but they do not fit the strict guidelines. We have had a number of examples just in this inquiry of people who want to go onto NEIS programs but they cannot because they have not been unemployed for long enough. We have just discussed the inappropriateness perhaps in some cases of the JSCI. One of our witnesses lost his benefits because he had to fly to New Zealand to attend his father’s funeral. We have had all of these sorts of examples. Is Centrelink discussing better ways of building in flexibility but without there being potential for that flexibility to be abused?

**Ms Vardon**—The rules around all the things that we do come from the two client departments who buy the service. We do have very good working relationships with those two departments; we have joint operating groups and all sorts of other things. We feed information back into them for their consideration. We have constant conversation with DEWRSB about the JSCI so that they get the benefit of our opinion. But as for talking specifics, the committee might like to talk to them about how they do it and under what circumstances. It is probably a bit more appropriate for them to comment than us. But we certainly do have a lively conversation with them; there is no detachment.

**Mr WILKIE**—Following on from the example where this particular person went to the funeral overseas, he lost his benefits for that period of time because obviously he could not be looking for a job while over there. But, as he pointed out to the committee, if he were working, he could get compassionate leave, he could make certain arrangements with his employer to enable him to attend the funeral but still get his payments. He stressed the point that there should be some flexibility there to provide for that. Will anything be happening in the future to enable that to occur?

**Ms Vardon**—We would suggest that this might be a good question to ask of the Department of Family and Community Services because the policy shifts and the policy rules are theirs. They also have a lively relationship with us in terms of getting good information, and they would take those things into account.

**Mr WILKIE**—I noted the comment before about the idea of getting the mature age onto programs like FLEX 3 earlier and the comment that there might be some budgetary considerations. But I also acknowledge that, if we are preventing them from being long-term unemployed, that also benefits the budget because you are stopping them from having to go on extended benefits.

The other issue I have—and I asked about this at another meeting but the people there could not give me any assistance with it—is that obviously intensive assistance is there for 12 months with the possible extension of six, or 18 months with the possible extension of 24. What happens to people who get to the end of that period? I noticed that in the original contracts they were put back to the beginning of their Jobsearch program.

**Mr Powell**—When someone comes out of intensive assistance, their eligibility for further assistance through Job Network, such as intensive assistance, is reset; that is, the clock starts again, if you like. Typically, when a customer exits intensive assistance, we would call them in. That is done in a variety of ways. There may be seminars to let people know about it and bring them up to date with what has occurred and what the new options are. Typically, they can pursue a range of options, a suite of options that are available, such as voluntary work and those sorts of things. We have, under consideration, a hierarchy of labour market programs which our client department DEWRSB is developing in consultation with FACS. We are awaiting advice from them as to what the appropriate sort of action or the appropriate pathway to employment for those customers should be.

**Mr Wightman**—Certainly we are not putting them through a new claim process at that point. It is just an opportunity to reset their outlook at the time and give them options which may help them, such as reduced reporting. When they are in intensive assistance, they are on reduced reporting where they do not have to hand in a fortnightly form, and we continue on that arrangement. They would have to hand in a form every 12 weeks if they had no variable earnings. At constant earnings or no earnings, they would be on the 12-weekly reporting.

**Mr Powell**—Customers are precluded from intensive assistance for a period of six months. Then, if they are eligible again through the application of the JSCI, they can be referred back to intensive assistance.

**Mr WILKIE**—Do you have any idea of numbers; what sort of percentage of people who have been on FLEX 3 are reaching that point?

**Mr Wightman**—I am not sure whether I have the numbers coming out of FLEX 3.

**Ms Vardon**—We can get them.

**Mr WILKIE**—I am curious to see how many people are getting to that point and just having to wait that extra six months after having finished everything to get restarted.

**CHAIR**—You can take that on notice.

**Ms Vardon**—We would suggest that the question be sent to DEWRSB.

**CHAIR**—There is another issue that also might be for DEWRSB. We have been told about Job Network putting people off its caseload once they are over the age of 50. Is that something of which you are aware; and, if so, are you doing anything about it?

**Ms Vardon**—We have some anecdotal evidence that that happens in some places. On the whole though, we have some really good stories about Job Network providers going out of their way to do special programs for 50-pluses. I suppose in all things there are people who are very good and people who are less good. I think DEWRSB, FACS and ourselves would be constantly watching to make sure that people do not do these things.

The other day I was at an office when one of our staff said that someone had tried to transfer a 50-plus person over, and we had refused to accept the referral back. She

considered that it was her role to work with the job provider to work out other ways of doing it. So it is not something that we would find acceptable, but the onus is on us to make sure that they learn other ways of doing it. Some of them say that it is very difficult to get work, that employers may not have jobs for people or that they are recruiting for another age group. That certainly is an issue in parts of Australia.

**Ms Mudie**—With the transition to the new market, you might find that there are new Job Network members who look after particular groups of people.

**Ms Hogg**—Indeed, a Job Network member cannot exit a customer without Centrelink's agreement. That is a particular safeguard with that issue.

**Mr WILKIE**—Unless they get to the end of their assistance and then they are automatically cut off.

**Ms Hogg**—Yes, then it is automatic.

**CHAIR**—Anyway, you are aware of it and you know that we are concerned about it. The last thing I would like to raise is NEIS. We have had people who have said that it does not seem fair that, because you have assets to some extent, you are ineligible for NEIS; and also that NEIS basically is creating undercapitalised micro-businesses. People have suggested that there also should be some kind of assistance to get into an established business, not just to set up something that is new. In your view, are there any changes that could be made to NEIS and the way it operates that would make it more effective, or is that too difficult?

**Mr Wightman**—It is more a matter for DEWRSB on the operation of that program.

**Ms Mudie**—Potentially, as an option, you could put your foot on an SED program as a front end to that.

**Mr Wightman**—Potentially we would support those sorts of arrangements, but we just deliver what we are required to. Further expansion of that is a matter for DEWRSB.

**Ms Vardon**—Another issue that was raised was access to specialist officers, and we have covered them a little. I just want to put on the record that we have a series of specialist officers in our organisation, all of whom provide services to the mature aged. There are the financial information service officers. They are extremely popular. They are very good for the baby boomers and for a whole lot of other people who find themselves having to think about their future. They do lots of information seminars and bring in expert speakers to talk about finances and how to look after them and so on. We run lots of seminars all around Australia. It is probably one of our most popular services. They also come to the seminars that are especially designed for the job seekers and give good information there.

We have 12 career information centres which, surprisingly, are heavily used by older people, particularly those who are having to have a career transition. Those career information centres are in all the capital cities as well as Newcastle, Geelong, Wollongong and on the Gold Coast. But they can also be accessed through any of our sites; certainly that advice can be accessed through any of our sites. That is a very positive thing that we do and

it is part of our contract with DEWRSB. We have occupational psychologists, whom we have already spoken about, who can provide extra assessment for people who are on the cusp or finding it difficult. One of the programs we have not talked a lot about would be JET and its officers. That started out particularly for women but progressively is moving into areas for men and women. That is a very individualised program with volunteers. There are thousands of stories of people going from home-based work to work in the work force and being supported and encouraged in getting into education. There is a strong connection between our JET officers and local TAFE colleges, and there are many stories of older women getting back into the work force because of these programs.

Then we have our social workers. They are particularly useful for some of the older people who have been in crisis situations. We also have indigenous officers. There is something called the ATSIC business loan. Some of our officers are working with ATSIC older people ‘to get them off benefits’—that is the quote I have here—and to build up their roles. We actually help people fill in business loan applications. All across our organisation the specialists have their eyes open to make sure that the mature unemployed get as many opportunities as we can give them.

**CHAIR**—What about for those from non-English speaking backgrounds; what special arrangements do you make there?

**Ms Vardon**—We have multicultural officers. They do a lot of work with people from other cultures. We have a very extensive public relations campaign into ethnic media; it is based in Sydney. It targets ethnic radio, ethnic media. Our web site is in 25 or 28 languages. All of our literature goes out in many languages. Our migrant liaison officers work with community groups. We have stories of them using the Vietnamese community and others whereby we are now running seminars in the languages of the people who are unemployed. That has started to happen in Melbourne, but I am sure it will spread. We work with the multicultural agencies to create job opportunities where we can. We have a fairly extensive outreach to ethnic places.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much for coming along and providing us with a submission and for being able to talk about it. I must say that you must be doing something right for us to have run a parliamentary inquiry with our having advertised all over the country for people to come and talk to us—which really gives them the opportunity in some cases to have a free kick at government related agencies—and with our having received only the relatively small number of criticisms of Centrelink that we have. That is not to trivialise the nature of the concerns put, but you are obviously doing something right.

**Ms Mudie**—We would table a couple of articles. There is information on the mature age workers program which is run through the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. There are also a couple of articles out of a publication from the UK on anti-ageism and the age of forgetfulness which might be of interest to the committee in terms of policy in the UK.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much.

[10.17 a.m.]

**CAMACHO, Mr Dionisio (Private capacity)**

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Mr Camacho, for giving us such a good submission and for coming along to speak to it today; we really appreciate it. Feel free to say whatever you want to say, and we will certainly listen to you. Whilst not all the members of the committee are here, they read everything that is said by witnesses. Would you like to talk to us? We will listen to you and then ask some questions.

**Mr Camacho**—Thank you very much. I have come here today to share my experiences as a migrant who has come to this new society. We migrants are from different backgrounds—different linguistic backgrounds and different racial backgrounds. When we come to Australia, we find that there are a lot of barriers to finding a job.

**CHAIR**—Where did you come from?

**Mr Camacho**—I came from South America, Peru.

**CHAIR**—How long ago did you come?

**Mr Camacho**—Almost 10 years ago.

**CHAIR**—Do you have a family?

**Mr Camacho**—I have no family.

**CHAIR**—So you are on your own in Australia?

**Mr Camacho**—Yes. I came as a political refugee. I have had to struggle very hard to learn English and access the labour market programs. I found a job in which I am doing my best to feel useful in this society.

**CHAIR**—What are you doing at the moment?

**Mr Camacho**—I am a project officer with the Department of Family and Community Services.

**CHAIR**—In Queensland?

**Mr Camacho**—Yes. I do that work because, as a migrant, I feel I have a duty to cooperate in the way that I am able to. At times I send papers to different organisations when they ask for input. I am still struggling to learn English.

**CHAIR**—Some of us are too. You were present when evidence was being given by the senior representatives or bosses, if you like, of Centrelink.

**Mr Camacho**—Yes. I was in Centrelink a short time ago, working with them.

**CHAIR**—Do you have any comments to make about the things the Centrelink people told us?

**Mr Camacho**—Centrelink has a network of migrant liaison officers at the national level; they have tasks that relate to migrant issues. They do their best and they try to help migrants in the best way possible. But there is a relationship between migrants themselves and the office. Many migrants in Australia have no family assistance and deal directly with simple welfare agencies like Centrelink. Many migrants are afraid to go to government agencies in order to ask for things. Migrants sometimes feel that it is tough at front counters. The people there have no cultural understanding of them.

We migrants come from different backgrounds. In the migrant community there is a huge diversity; there are migrants from Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, et cetera. We have different values, different attitudes to society and to government, et cetera. Some migrants—for example, Cambodian and Vietnamese—are very shy. They do not know their rights. They just go into the Centrelink office and ask about general things; they may not have enough self-esteem to ask for things such as English classes or employment prospects.

I would criticise Centrelink in that it needs to have more cross-cultural understanding. We are living in a culturally diverse society and it is very important for those agencies to have that sort of training. The same sorts of things happen, for example, with private employment agencies. They see migrants who cannot speak proper English as being unprofitable people to take on. They say, 'Give us your name and phone number and we'll call you.' But migrants never get any phone call and they feel very frustrated. They are some of the real world problems that the migrant faces in Australian society.

**CHAIR**—There has been a lot of talk over the last few years—I suppose the most vocal was Mrs Pauline Hanson who, thankfully, is not here, at least at the moment—criticising migrants for wanting to get social security. But in your submission, you put the other point of view: that there are a lot of migrants who do not come to get help from Centrelink and places like that because they feel ashamed. They spend all the money they have saved or what little money they may have. Would you like to talk to us about that issue?

**Mr Camacho**—Basically, most migrants are very responsible in themselves. In most countries of the world, we have to work every day just to be able to eat that day. Then we come to this society and we want to follow that way of life. Because of the barriers with all the things I have mentioned, we find that in this society it is very hard to reach our aim of finding a job quickly. Also, we find that there are still problems with racism in the community. Perhaps it cannot be seen easily because of the mature age issue. But it still is there and in people's practices.

There were a lot of worries in Queensland in the migrant communities about Pauline Hanson. In Brisbane particularly, there are many disadvantaged groups like Vietnamese, Cambodians and those who have come from Yugoslavia. Also we have people from Middle Eastern backgrounds. These people were very worried about the resurgence of groups like

Pauline Hanson's group. They were very worried because many of them have had no experience in dealing with racist groups.

Most migrants are always keen to find a job; they are keen to improve their English. But what is happening with English classes is this: when migrants, refugees used to come to Australia, there used to be—and it is still now in place—500 hours of English classes available to them. Even if those refugees reached the level of what was called 'Australian standard language proficiency level 2', they could still access English classes. But now they can access advanced English migrant program only for 10 weeks. They can only do that class just the one time. After that, there are no more classes for migrants.

When overseas qualified migrants come to Australia, besides having to have a two-year waiting period, they have access to the advanced English migrants programs just the one time. But overseas qualified migrants are from different areas of qualification—medical doctors, engineers, technicians, and so on. Each profession has its own particular English terminology. It is very hard in 10 weeks to learn, for example, all engineering terminology. That is why I believe that the English classes that at the moment are provided to migrants are not enough. I think the government needs to reassess those strategies and provide a little more English learning to migrants. There are a lot of good qualified migrants with a lot of skills to offer Australia, but learning the English language is the major trouble for us.

**CHAIR**—I appreciate and understand that. One thing people have said to us is that the advice about work in Australia that is given to people who are thinking of coming to Australia is often not very good. If you are a refugee, of course you are just thankful to get out of the problem you are in and come to Australia. But, for people who are planning to come to Australia, we have been told that the advice they are given about the reasonable possibility of having work is not very good. Do you have experience with this?

**Mr Camacho**—Yes, I think this is a very good question. Migrants in different parts of the world apply to come to Australia. When they approach the Australian posts, they say, for example, 'I am an engineer,' or 'a journalist,' et cetera. 'I want to migrate to Australia as a professional.' The post staff cannot say, 'Yes, okay, you're welcome because we need professionals.' The applicant submits all his papers. After some procedures, the applicant gets a letter of invitation to come to Australia as a resident. But at that stage those migrants believe that the Australian posts, because they have said yes to them, have recognised their qualifications already. They think that when they come to Australia they will have nothing to do with recognition of qualifications because they are already engineers and medical doctors.

Also, many of them have no idea that when they come to Australia they will have to deal with bodies like the national office for recognition of overseas qualifications. Besides that, they have to deal with professional bodies like the Australian Medical Association or professional bodies for dentistry or veterinary science. That is the more difficult step for them to go through.

I think Australian posts need to be trained perhaps in being more efficient in providing proper information to migrants in order to create less problems for those newcomers. Just as one example, one day I was visiting one group of migrants from Bosnia. This happened maybe four or five years ago. One man was very upset. He had been a television presenter



for around 18 years. His English was maybe like mine—with a lot of problems but still understandable. He told us that the Australian post advised him that he was good enough to go to Australia, that he would find a job, et cetera. When he came to Australia, he was already more than 45 years old and his English was not good enough. He thought that he would find a job as a television presenter here. But even his qualification as a journalist was already far behind as far as concerned dealing with modern knowledge, et cetera. It was very frustrating for him. He told me that, before he had come to Australia, he had had to sell his house, his car. When he arrived in Australia, he found a totally different reality.

**CHAIR**—It is cruel.

**Mr Camacho**—Situations like that happen.

**CHAIR**—It is cruel. Not only is it unacceptable, it is very, very unfair.

**Mr BARRESI**—I appreciate what you are saying. We have discussed in the past the level of advice that overseas posts give to migrants. I am trying to work out how to get around that. They cannot say to someone, ‘Yes, here in India you are a qualified doctor but in Australia you will be battling with discrimination because of your accent.’ We cannot tell people that they will be discriminated against because it would be incorrect of us as a government to say that. How can we handle this? What can we do? Should we put them in touch with immigrants who are already in Australia?

**Mr Camacho**—Yes. It is my understanding that the best thing to do—and this is just my idea—might be to provide them with information in their own language about the procedures they will have to follow in Australia; we should explain to them in their own language the steps they have to follow when they get to Australia.

**Mr BARRESI**—We can do that. They may have the qualifications to be a television presenter or to work in veterinary science but, at the end of the day—and I see this in my office—they sometimes are battling against a bias that people may have. You called it racial discrimination; I think it is more a bias rather than racial discrimination. You cannot put that in a brochure. How can we be honest with them about that, without putting it in a brochure?

**Mr Camacho**—It is a very difficult situation, particularly for medical doctors. I think in Australia there are around 1,500 medical doctors whose qualifications have not been recognised. They are having a lot of traumas, a lot of problems. Their way of life in this society now is very traumatic. I think the government needs to approach professional bodies and perhaps talk to them in a more positive way.

**CHAIR**—I think both you and Mr Barresi are saying that we should give them information. But of course, with respect to Mr Barresi, it is hard to be on television these days if you are bald or if you wear an earring, for example, even though you may have all the skills in the world. People need to be given the facts, and often the facts are not being given to them.

**Mr Camacho**—Yes, in their own language. That would be very good.

**Mr BARRESI**—A lot of immigrants, including my father, came to this country in the fifties, sixties and even seventies. If they were not able to get a job which they were qualified for overseas, they could always go for another job because at that time there were high levels of employment and growth and all those sorts of things. In your experience, what are these immigrants doing? These are the ones who are coming here with these qualifications and not being recognised and who are struggling to get into these jobs. What are they now doing? Are they going for other jobs, or are they not trying at all?

**Mr Camacho**—I have met many medical doctors, engineers, veterinary scientists, et cetera, who are still in the process of recognition. They are still hoping that one day they will get their qualifications recognised. In the meantime, a lot of them are driving taxis or doing temporary work. Many medical doctors are doing cleaning in the hospitals. They are doing all of those sorts of jobs to survive and to fund their recognition processes. It is very hard.

**CHAIR**—A lot of the problem is that they have come to Australia in ignorance, having not been told of what the situation would be, and their expectations have been too high. This has been very unfair to them.

**Mr Camacho**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Mr Camacho, thank you very much for your excellent submission and also for your work with migrants. Mr Barresi in particular spends a lot of time working with migrants in his area; he perhaps more than any of us knows how difficult it is. We will never understand how hard it has been for you, but I admire what you have done.

**Mr Camacho**—Yes, to be able to understand migrants it is very important to be a migrant yourself. It is easy to talk sometimes in public forums about migrants. But in real life it is very hard, very complex and full of worries.

**CHAIR**—It is. Thank you very much.

**Mr Camacho**—Thank you very much, all of you.

**CHAIR**—When the committee's submissions are published, I might ask Ms Chan to send you a copy of the transcript, the record of your submission today, if that would be of interest to you.

**Mr Camacho**—Thank you very much.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Wilkie**):

That the committee receive as evidence and include in its records as an exhibit for the inquiry into issues specific to workers over 45 the documents received from Centrelink entitled:

- (a) 'Focus on experience' (NSW Mature Age Program);
- (b) 'The Age of Forgetfulness' by Richard Worsely in *People Management*, 30 June 1999;

- (c) 'Anti-ageism protagonists divided on a voluntary code' by Mark Whitehead in *People Management*, 30 June 1999;  
and
- (d) 'Grey Areas' by Tane Pickard in *People Management*, 29 July 1999.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Barresi**):

That this committee authorise publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at the public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 10.37 a.m.**