

Chris Cullinan,

Mr. E. Humphrey,
Committee Secretary,
Community Affairs Reference Committee,
Parliament House,
Canberra, 2600.



Dear Mr. Humphrey,

On Tuesday, 12th October, 2004, the Sunbury "*Leader*" published extracts of a Health Services Union submission to your inquiry into aged care. Printed on the front page with bold headlines for sensationalism. Nothing like a local scandal to sell newspapers. This note is a late submission to your inquiry, and as an unsolicited response to newspaper propaganda. An information copy has been forwarded to the President of the Lion's committee of management.

The published allegations are without foundation. They must have a deleterious effect on the Union's other submissions.

In April, 1998 it was my melancholy task to admit my 86 year old aunt into this hostels care. Eileen was unable to continue living at home and no other accommodation was available. The local Lions Club of Sunbury Elderly Peoples Home was chosen as one of her life long friends resided there. Eileen passed away on the 30th July, 2003 after some 5 years of benign residence.

During these 5 years I made it a priority to visit the hostel at least twice a week and to encourage other relatives and friends to call upon her whenever they could. Most of her peers had predeceased her and loneliness became a problem.

Previously I was on the management committee of another retirement complex which included an aged care hostel. Thus was pre armed with a set of standards that the Sunbury home had to meet. Over these 5 years a problem never arose that was not be quickly and satisfactorily rectified. The staff in general were a happy, capable lot, easily approached and adept in their work.

My personal experience was that management was fully approachable. Even to the degree that they listened to matters that others would consider trivial. Care and consideration of their residents was the priority. There are always tensions in an establishment where clients are not residents by choice and where decades long behaviour patterns may clash with the sensitivities of fellow inhabitants. Of course there were unrealistic expectations and the view that the hostel was there to cater for residents every demand. These aberrations were managed with care and sensitivity.

The physical layout is such that upon entering the foyer the dinning room is on your right, access to the covered walkway from the residential rooms is directly ahead and the general office and managers office are to your immediate left. Doors into all these rooms are usually open. It is normal to directly observe staff presence, including the manager. Both staff offices have adopted an 'open door' policy and personal are easily contacted.

I would have have met the three previous employees that furnished the statement to you. They expressed no untoward concerns to me. Their statements appear to be unfounded allegations, fabrications made by disaffected former employees. I know of no evidence to support the claims.

They have made written statements.

1. Workplace bullying. Never saw any sign of this: or heard any mention of it. Older persons have a surprising capacity to take in a wide range of issues and inform their visitors of gossip and scandal. Staff infighting would have been a hot topic of conversation.
2. Stress. Aged care requires a special type of individual to cope with the ordinary daily challenges. Neither my aunt or any other the other residents that I came to know gave any indication that some individual staff members inability to deal with stress was having an untoward effect on them.
3. Management absences. There was always management cadre available during accepted business hours. Visits to my aunt varied by time and day as I did not wish a pattern to develop. Rarely did I have to call on management twice to obtain an interview. Senior management were occasionally absent. They had other management duties to perform outside the hostel or had amended their hours of attendance for quality control purposes.
4. Unwarranted accusations. Cannot comment. Never heard of any.
5. Inability to provide quality care. This statement is a fabrication.
6. Unavailability of management. Not true. Management have always been friendly, approachable and have shown an ability to resolve any minor conflicts in a manner that attempts to satisfy all parties.
7. Grievance procedure ignored. Highly doubtful. Over the years I met and talked with members of the Committee of Management. When on the premises they were always available for a chat.
8. Union member ostracised. Cannot comment. Am not aware of staff's union affiliations.

During my involvement with this hostel there was a regular programmed stream of consultant practitioners and others calling on an opportunity basis. Visitors known to me were: Chiropractor, Medical Officers, State Government Welfare Staff, Hairdressers, Members of the Committee of Management, Ministers of Religion, Shire Councillors and Trainee nurses from Victoria University. None of these expressed to me any concerns on management/staff issues. The then Minister for Aging, Hon. Neil Andrews visited this establishment with his entourage. If there were problems surely that was a prime opportunity to have them highlighted? His visit was publicised in local newspapers.

As the years progressed I became well known to both residents and staff. Individual non-management staff approached me two or three times requesting that I consider standing for a position on the Committee of Management. This was declined as I did not live locally and was not a Lions member. Trying to manage a small farm during drought years was also a restriction.

All levels of people employed or visiting aged care establishments have a 'duty of care' towards the residents. If something disconcerting is observed they have a conscientious obligation to report the matter and see the problem addressed. If not resolved within the establishment they must air their concerns to outside regulatory bodies. To my knowledge the three complainants never took this path.

Sunbury is a small town detached from the Melbourne Metropolitan area. It is easy to locate individuals addresses and telephone numbers. If there were ongoing problems with this hostel why did not the complainants raise matters with persons of standing in the local community?

There is no doubt that the three witnesses believe what they have said. For just over three years they have concealed their frustrations, approached no supervising body, and have deluded themselves into believing their own arguments. A self fulfilling prophecy? Have the perceived problems just disappeared on the resignation of these staff members?

The three individuals should be encouraged to repeat their statements in Sunbury, before witnesses, and outside the envelope of parliamentary privilege.

If their accusations are not repeated in public, may I respond with a simple phrase. "Codswallop, sir, codswallop".

Yours sincerely,



Chris Cullinan.
25th October, 2004.