

I miss Mum: the pain of aged care isolation

BY ANITA BEAUMONT

WHEN a Waratah aged care facility went into lockdown due to a COVID outbreak this week, Anne Gleeson returned to her car and she wept.

Her mother, Connie Jennings - the matriarch of a very large family - has lived at Maroba for more than six years. But the past two had been "extremely difficult".

Before the pandemic, Mrs Gleeson visited her mother there every second day.

"My eight-year-old granddaughter - Mum's great granddaughter - used to come with me once a week," she said. "Not only was she a tonic for mum, she used to go and visit all of them and talk to them. But because of restrictions, she has been unable to visit. She misses Mum as much as Mum misses her."

Daily limitations on visitors meant the family had a "roster" of who was visiting Mrs Jennings, and when.

In the past two years, during lockdowns, there had been catch-ups through the glass doors of the facility. There had been phone calls and Facetime too. But it wasn't the same. Instead, affection was socially distanced. There were no hugs, no kisses on the cheek. Masks meant conversations were muffled, and hard to hear.

Just before Christmas, Mrs Jennings - who will be 97 in March - had a fall.

"Mum isn't the lady she was eight weeks ago," Mrs Gleeson said. "She has become very frail. We have gone into lockdown again



RUNNING OUT OF TIME: Anne Gleeson's mother Connie Jennings, 96, is a resident at Maroba at Waratah. The village went into lockdown this week after a COVID outbreak. **Picture:** Marina Neil

now, and I won't get the time back with her that I am losing. But that said, I know why the home has had to make the decisions it has. This has put tremendous strain on them as well. The situation in aged care is becoming drastic for both staff and families. The additional workload on staff has been great."

Mrs Gleeson said even before the pandemic, she was aware the aged care workforce was stretched to critical levels.

"Since COVID, I understand the situation has become even worse," she said. "The staff have been decimated by having Omicron themselves, or being close contacts, and I don't think

this 'surge workforce' we all keep hearing about actually exists. Aged care workers are paid an appalling rate, but still find within themselves the ability to treat all with dignity and respect."

Mrs Gleeson said physically, her mother was being very well cared for - even with staff shortages.

"Emotionally, not only Mum but all of the residents, I think they feel really isolated, because they are not seeing their family and friends," she said. "Given Mum's age I know that her lifespan is limited and I am overwhelmingly sad that the visits and contact I have missed with her cannot be recovered."

Mrs Gleeson said she

had just seen her mother on Tuesday when she heard the facility needed to go into lockdown due to positive cases on site.

"I had bit of a weep when I got into the car after they closed down," she said. "It was really hard not seeing her for Christmas, because there was a lockdown then too. We had a Facetime with her on Christmas Day, which was lovely, but not the same as seeing her in person. If Mum was to contract COVID now, I don't think she'd get through it, with how frail she is now... I wouldn't have said that six months ago."

"I understand the home's decisions, and I fully support them because everything

they are doing is to keep the residents safe, but it has been extremely difficult."

The outbreak at Maroba is one of about 1500 across Australia. At least eight of its residents had contracted COVID-19 this week, and one had died.

National government data shows more than 3200 aged care residents and 3800 aged care staff have the virus.

"Staff are required to undergo RATs prior to starting work, and anyone who has a positive result cannot work - again impacting on capacity to provide staff to care for residents," Mrs Gleeson said.

"While Maroba has done everything to confine not only residents but staff to

particular 'suburbs' within the home, Omicron found its way in. The most vulnerable members of our society in terms of health needs are being put at risk of illness or worse by the present practice of facing this pandemic 'head on'."

Mrs Gleeson called on the federal government to increase the wages of the aged care workforce now by bringing them in line with hospital nursing roles. Residents deserved quality, appropriate care.

"You can't expect people to keep working in this sector when they are paid peanuts," she said. "Their wages have to be addressed as a matter of urgency."

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