

**Submission
No 78**

**INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO ELDER ABUSE IN NEW
SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Carers NSW

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13 November 2015

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Re: NSW Inquiry into Elder abuse

Carers NSW would like to thank the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 for the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry. This submission will briefly address items within the terms of reference and how these items relate to carers. A carer is anyone who provides informal care and support to a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail.

About Carers NSW

Carers NSW is a not for profit registered charity and company limited by guarantee. It is governed by a Board of Directors in accordance with the *Corporations Act 2001* and the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012*. Carers NSW vision is for an Australia that values and supports all carers, and our goals are to work with carers to improve their health, wellbeing, resilience and financial security; and to have caring recognised as a shared responsibility of family, community, and government.

Forms of abuse experienced by older persons and relationships and settings in which abuse occurs

Carers NSW would first like to point out that carers are often misrepresented in media reports regarding elder abuse. Sensational headlines frequently use the word 'carer' to refer to paid care workers who are perpetrators of abuse, not to informal carers as defined by the *NSW Carers (Recognition) Act 2010*. Carers NSW is concerned about this confusion of terminology and has repeatedly expressed its concerns to newspaper editors, other media outlets and the wider public.

Carers NSW is aware that sometimes carers are perpetrators of abuse. We strongly believe that this is most often related to the high to extreme levels of psychological distress carers can experience as a result of their caring role. The Carers NSW 2014 Carer Survey found that carers, especially carers of the elderly, experienced significantly lower wellbeing and significantly higher psychological distress than Australian averages.ⁱ Indeed, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index indicates that carers have the lowest wellbeing of any group, including the unemployed and homeless.ⁱⁱ Timely, appropriate support to assist carers in their caring role and promote their own health and wellbeing may therefore reduce the risk of elder abuse perpetrated by carers.

Carers can also be victims of abuse perpetrated by the person they care for, especially where the person they care for exhibits behaviours of concern as a result of their condition. For example, an ageing parent caring for

adult offspring with an intellectual disability, or an older person caring for a spouse with dementia. For older carers in abusive situations, it may be difficult to escape abuse because of the often high and ongoing support needs of the person they care for. The Carers NSW 2014 Carer Survey found that over 40 per cent of carer respondents had nobody else who helped them care. One third said there was not even anyone available to help them if they were ill or needed a break.ⁱⁱⁱ

Abuse within carer relationships is complex due to the dependent nature of care. Loyalty and commitment to the person they care for may prevent older carers from reporting or addressing the abuse, especially if it is linked to deteriorating capacity or behaviours related to disability and not seen as intentional. Over 40 per cent of respondents to our 2014 Carer Survey indicated that they felt an emotional obligation to care, while one in four respondents felt they had no other choice. Furthermore, many older carers are in interdependent care relationships and may rely on the person they care for practically, emotionally or financially. For example, a frail aged mother with a son with mild intellectual disability or mental illness, may be subject to occasional violent outbursts from him. She provides him with a home, emotional and financial support but may also rely on him for assistance with meal preparation, home maintenance, transport or social support. The circumstances and nature of their care relationship, makes the abuse within it difficult to resolve.

Carers NSW also hears from carers who are being exploited or restricted by other people in their family. Carers often turn to Carers NSW for support and advice when their family members are putting them under unreasonable pressure to continue their caring role without adequate support. Other carers report that members of their family place undue financial restrictions on them, for example, accusing them of spending too much on an elderly parent. Lack of support from, and poor relationships with, family members can make an already demanding carer role even harder to sustain.

Government and community support services sought by victims of elder abuse

Carers NSW provides information, referral, emotional support and counselling for carers, including those reaching breaking point or experiencing abuse. While referral can be made to appropriate agencies in situations of abuse, we believe that developing a framework for elder abuse which recognises the needs of carers would be of great assistance.

For further information, please contact _____, Policy and Development Officer, on _____ or _____.

Yours sincerely,

Elena Katrakis
CEO
Carers NSW

ⁱ Broady, T. (2015): Caring for the Elderly. The wellbeing and satisfaction of informal carers. Poster presentation at the Australian Association of Gerontology conference 2015 in Alice Springs, Australia.

ⁱⁱ Cummins, R. (2015): What Makes Us Happy: Third Edition, Australian Unity.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carers NSW (2014) Carers NSW 2014 Carer Survey: Main report, Carers NSW, Sydney.