



Australia Cares

Creating a society of care

An initiative of the Sydney Policy Lab at the University of Sydney



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY
—
Sydney Policy
Lab

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Ngyini ngalawangun mari budyari Gadinurada.

We meet together on the very beautiful Gadi Country.

The Sydney Policy Lab acknowledges the generations upon generations of Traditional Custodians that have held responsibilities for Country, “custodian-ing” it from one generation to the next. We acknowledge the cultural protocols of protecting and holding knowledges that have sustained culture and Country for over 60,000 years.

Based in Sydney, we acknowledge the Gadigal Elders, past and present, and the beautiful Gadi Country where we work. We extend this acknowledgement to the Country, Elders and Ancient Ones of many other First Nations communities across Australia. We honour and respect the sovereignty of the many Nations where we live and work.

We are committed to working respectfully with First Nations communities across these beautiful lands, seas and skies.

Promoting a deep conversation about why and how we care

Australia Cares aims to radically transform Australia's systems, practices and cultures of care. This initiative has emerged from a diverse coalition of people across care communities, researchers and policymakers.

This is not another welfare reform project, but something that aims to challenge the way we live and the way we organise our communities.

Building on the momentum for change generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, its goal is to help Australia become a more caring nation. Much deep thinking and building of connections between people has already been done, and the project is now moving into a new phase, investigating practical questions about how to improve our care system and experimenting with new modes of policy design. The Sydney Policy Lab, with the support of the Paul Ramsay Foundation, invites you to be involved.

*"Everybody needs care. Everybody deserves care.
And everybody needs to have that done with dignity."*

Dr Sheelagh Daniels-Mayes, Kamilaroi woman and lecturer
Indigenous Studies, University of Melbourne



Big change is needed and it must start now

It's often said that Australia's care system is in crisis. This is apparent now in the aftermath of several severe weather events, the COVID pandemic and the ongoing social inequality experienced by First Nations people.

These problems and others have exposed greater numbers of people to trauma, placing additional pressures on already highly stressed systems of care, leading to overwork, staff losses and a reduction in the quality of the care that can be provided. Every day we see more reports of people being deeply shocked at the care their aged parents, family members with disabilities and children are receiving. It is happening across all types of care, leading to repeated tragedies, injustices and public scandals, as royal commission after royal commission continues to expose.

This crisis has been a long time in the making. For decades, the expectations of our rapidly changing society for improved care haven't been met. We are less dependent on institutionalising those who do not fit normative moulds; our population is ageing; our understanding of physical and mental illness is deepening and broadening; technology is offering the hope of new types of care; and climate change is making care for Country and environment a national and global imperative. Alongside this, decades of 'economic reform' have made care more routinised, bureaucratised, marketised and narrowly 'efficient', often to the great detriment of those who provide care, and those who need it the most.

It all adds up to a care system that is struggling. And one that needs more than tinkering. It needs a reckoning about where care sits within a more caring society. We believe that to improve our 'system' of care, we need to create more than just a better care system, we need to create a society of care.

It is time therefore to do three things:

- 1. Rethink the premisses of our entire care system, including by having a purposeful debate about what we mean by care**
- 2. Examine how we can improve the practice of care to reflect our new needs and understandings**
- 3. Explore new ways to make our nation-wide care system broader, stronger, more sustainable and better.**

Reframing how we think of 'care'

Despite the best efforts of hard-working and innovative carers, the way we provide care is, in places, trailing far behind fast evolving social expectations and best practice. So where should our rethinking of care begin?

In recent decades, our understanding of caring has been enriched by new thinking and research, pointing to the needs humans have for care from others, how that care works best when it is based on human relationships rather than bureaucratic rules and abstract principles, and how individuals thrive and develop their full capabilities when they care for and receive care from others.

With this richer understanding in mind, the Australia Cares Initiative has been examining new approaches to rethinking care.

"In Western societies, we have tended to reduce care as being something that is at the kind of bottom rung of significance and importance, in terms of what is valued in society. And we see that in the way professional roles are played out, the roles that are paid less, so those that are explicitly about caring, and the more technical they become, then the more highly they are valued and are paid more. And actually, we need to reverse some of that thinking around that."

Professor Brendan McCormack,
Head of The Susan Wakil School of Nursing and Midwifery and former nurse

We need to start with the proposition that care is a fundamental part of life and not some regrettable cost that we should always seek to minimise by providing the most basic care possible. We believe care should not be reduced to transactions between individuals, constantly subjected to efficiency and cost cutting drives. Care is about relationships. And care must be valued and built into the way we organise our society and live our lives.

We believe care must be guided by the needs of those who receive it, with greater control over its design and management exercised by those who provide care, rather than by policymakers far removed from its daily practice.

We see care as something that involves changing the way communities, not just government agencies and care providers behave. We believe we are all carers in some form. Improving care will therefore require conversations about how our neighbourhoods function, the nature of our daily interactions with friends and co-workers, and our wiliness and capacity as individuals to step away from the whirlwind of working life to spend time with family members and other people we know.

We also reject the gender inequality built into our historically heavily gendered provision of care. Care has traditionally been done mainly by women both inside and outside the home, and has been either unpaid or low-paid. These practices have persisted through the big evolutions in care which have taken place – the creation of the welfare state and, later, welfare markets. We believe this can be changed.

In short, we believe the narrow, short-term, gendered and individual thinking that has for too long shaped our care system must be replaced with something better.



Thinking through the practice and system of care

In this project, we are inviting people from all points in our systems of care to join with us to reimagine and improve care in Australia.



Some important questions for discussion present themselves:



1. How do we ensure care is properly informed by those who experience it as givers and receivers? What do people receiving care want and need to live a good life? What role do Australians want to play in the care of those they love? How can care programs and policies be co-designed with those who use care?



2. How do we ensure those who provide services and understand the needs of those cared for – family and friend carers and care workers – have real power in the care system? How can centralised bureaucracies and think tanks play a supporting role?



3. How can we help care organisations build strong relationships between each other, rather than sit in separate silos?



4. How do we build better stronger relationships between people and their communities so that we are all surrounded by care? How do we ensure everyone is valued and involved – by structuring communities in more human and caring ways? And how do we more effectively ‘work upstream and think downstream’ – taking into account the human consequence of our economic and political decisions and priorities? In short, how can we make care a genuinely collective responsibility?



5. How do we ensure care work, long considered ‘women’s work’, is not dismissed as second class work but is treated as skilled work that is deeply valued by those who need care? How do we make care a shared responsibility of all genders – one that is professionally recognised and justly rewarded?

“What about if we tried to make this not about us? What about if we tried to make this about the people in the communities that we exist for? What about if we did that – we flip our mental maps around? What would our governance look like? What would our management structures look like? What if we actually lived up to the rhetoric?”

Lin Hatfield Dodds, CEO of The Benevolent Society

These are the main directions in which our work is currently heading. We want it to get Australians thinking about how we can create a more caring society and live our lives in ways that take greater account of the care we and others will one day need.

We hope the project will help us to create communities and systems of care where people can flourish as persons; where community and family networks are their primary place of care, nurturing and becoming; where care and being cared for are considered a ‘normal’ part of how we construct neighbourhoods, communities and societies; where the way we care reflects ecological connections and every form of diversity; where paid-care becomes a highly valued role that is remunerated appropriately and recognised as expert work; and where we only enter institutional care when we really need to.

“I think that’s the value of people, people are important. Doesn’t matter what age or what disability you have, or what you do. We’re all valuable, we all have something to give. We’re all part of a system and we all need support to benefit society as a whole.”

Brett Collis, NDIS participant, carer

We believe the project will demonstrate the good sense of creating a more caring society and help Australians rethink caring as a form of investment that will improve our standard of living and make us a healthier, happier and more secure nation.

We believe that people will recognise the practical benefits of improving the way we care – something capable of generating savings at all levels of government, avoiding the costly consequences of the crime, poor health, social disruption and other problems caused by a harsh and uncaring society.

We also believe better care will create a stronger and more productive workforce, helping meet labour shortages by assisting those who currently are unable to work to do so. It will undoubtedly create many jobs – the care sector being a major source of jobs growth today. And by improving the pay and conditions of those jobs – and there are many of them – it will help make us a fairer and more cohesive society.

While some of the big benefits of creating this caring society are economic, they are far wider. Having better care is intrinsically valuable to us as human beings – because one day we will likely all need it.

The work of the Policy Lab

The Sydney Policy Lab is working with others to help bring this new system of care into being. In addition to care users, our partners include First Nations members, researchers, practitioners, managers and executives, economists, unionists, public policy experts, social innovators, royal commissioners, innovators and many more. We will act as a resource to get the debate on care going, make sure those normally excluded are included, and bring carers together across the silos to start building something better.

Our work encompasses many practical themes:

- A vision of care our society might share.
- A policy and investment framework that will lead to change.
- How we can improve practice in the design and delivery of care.
- How we judge and measure success in ways that are simultaneously human and hard-headedly realistic.

By bringing people together to examine the future of care, we will create a mixture of co-creative solutions, drawing on the peer-to-peer knowledge of professionals, family members and community networks, building connections and goodwill as we generate new ideas for improving care.

The Sydney Policy Lab's relational model of work makes us the logical choice to undertake this vital task. Our way of working is grounded in the idea that the only way to achieve lasting change is by harnessing the collective and complimentary expertise of practice and research and the experience and wisdom from First Nations people and other Australians in all their diversity.

Our work will take many forms, including our innovative People's Commission and Care Labs that will test new approaches to care and policymaking about care in real world conditions.

In doing this, we acknowledge that we are building upon the wisdom and practice of First Nations people from generation to generation and the decades of work of many others who have dedicated their lives to improving Australia's care system.

Get in touch

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