

Making the Unseen Seen



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Aged Care Advisor – Strategy, Governance and Operational Translation

Let's start with some basics about the aged care sector.

It's a sector in transition. And by transition, I refer to some land mark events and a whole pool of experiences in between. I won't labour on about the Royal Commission because I think the people joining us today have either heard enough along the way through either their workplaces or through the media to have a sense of that, but it is good to remember that pre-royal commission South Australia had an experience with a site that was state government run – OAKDEN.

Events at OAKDEN in early 2017 triggered a conversation that our federal government and community had already been working up to – that is the state of our aged care system. By 2018 a Royal Commission into Aged Care was announced, and the flavour of the announcement carried the weight of a national disaster. So that's the backdrop in which the aged care sector operates today, and the report is not actually final yet but is expected in November of this year.

At the time that Oakden was still operating, I was the Executive Director responsible for Prison Health and Primary Health care services in this state and was frequently in contact with many people who were also close to OAKDEN. It's that combination of experiences that has really accelerated my personal interest in this idea of making the unseen seen or creating transparent operating environments.

That being said, lets go back to why the aged care sector is in transition.

Along the way, and really in the same time frame as the Royal Commission events, the sector has moved to different regulatory environment. • This includes the now famous 8 standards for aged care (which I am a bit of a fan girl for because they put the consumer at the centre of the story).

- Unannounced spot visits are a thing and the Safety and Quality Commission are regular visitors to aged care – those of us working regularly in the sector will know the drill. You are just making your morning coffee, thinking well, I do think operations are going just fine today, then a panicked receptionist from a site calls your mobile (the number that only key people use) and says, “They are here today, there are three of them and they are interested in standard 2”. Then a well-oiled machine that I like to call “accreditation ready” swings into motion and the cycle of demonstrating compliance, via documentation and staff and client interviews begins and continues for a day, maybe two, maybe more if a cascade of unfavourable events lines up in the assessor's path. Then a week later a report arrives, a non-compliance or two, often minor are listed, corrective action ensues, organisation wide continuous improvement is triggered and then we continue until that cycle repeats. Sometimes its weekly, sometimes its not for months. In my view this has had a tremendous impact on upping the knowledge of what compliant practice looks like in aged care but it has dulled the desire for quality improvement because it's a fun and rewarding part of your job and its consumed resources that might have otherwise driven the same improvement.

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It's a bit like being told to go for a run vs waking up and deciding you'd go for a run.

- Consumer directed care has been built as a finance model. This relies on consumers being well prepped to make active decisions about their care. This is an education process for both staff and consumers (that is clients and families) who might have grown up with a nurse knows best kind of approach and not be as health literate as the funding system now assumes. This dynamic has changed the shape of both home and community care.
- Retirement Living (the part of aged care no one talks about as much as residential and home care (its like the quiet yet popular income generating cousin in the sector) is now also becoming more regulated. Some of you will remember a media storm around one providers contracts and provisions and will also know that regulatory standards are increasing in this area too.

The point of all of that being is that the sector is being pulled into a shape determined by regulatory requirements and broad changes to the funding environment, all at the same time as our general workforce is receiving multiple media messages a day saying in one way or another "aged care is not great, workers are underperformers and big brother is watching" so finding staff is increasingly difficult and now we have COVID. More risk, more regulation, more blame. Not much more in the way of support. Aged care workers weren't even included in the "front line worker" initiatives to give people better access to supermarkets during lockdown. COVID and aged care is another story all on its own.

Despite all of that I love working in aged care. It's an industry that is going places and can be really good. I see good people doing good things with amazing clients in their 60s through to those over 100 every day. I personally love the care that is offered to those with dementia.

BUT – I do not think that anyone in these circumstances can be considered an expert as all of the rules we've grown up with or contributed to making have changed. So how do we make sure all is well.

That's where I come to making the unseen seen.

We are all learning to make a seamless connection between regulatory body requirements, our action plans for continuous improvement.

Personally, I don't want to wait for a regulator to tell me where I've missed something. I want to know. So, the strategies to do that need to be every day ones.

I'm happy to talk about whatever this audience is interested in, but some of the innovation in this area includes

- External parties conducting internal audits
- Establishing a semi-independent advocate role
- Adopting a compliance map that sets out expectations against organisational desire
- Finding alignment with non-mandatory or best practice standards
- Clear accountability mapping (who is watching which ball in this game)
- Contracting micro-expertise to work with generalist experts in organisations
- Considering where resourcing is aligned within an organisation (compliance / improvement split)
- Actually building our consumer voice in practical embedded everyday ways
- Focusing on operational traction to get intent on the ground
- Opening up pathways for the board while maintaining decision structures

In fact, depending on interest there might be more Q and A sessions that spring from this one.