Planning for the future of aged care
changing attitudes towards older Australians and aged care workers

Susan Banks and Lisa Denny

Key Points

Caring for older Australians is an increasingly important source of employment and will contribute to strong workforce growth in the coming decades.

Meeting demand for workers in the sector will require a dramatic shift in community perceptions about older Australians and a reduction in stigma around the aged care sector.

The care sector overall is the largest – and fastest growing – source of jobs in Tasmania and improving perceptions among those outside and inside the sector will improve care for older Tasmanians and general community wellbeing.

Tasmanian research suggests that removing stigma can increase the status and desirability of aged care roles and improve relationships between carers and their clients.

Current discussions around funding models for future aged care should consider the community-wide benefits of improving the status of aged care workers and their clients.

Research is needed into the service quality and satisfaction impacts of emotion work in aged care, to allow this aspect of caring to be factored into funding, training and wages.

A strategy to reduce stigma associated with the care sector involving media, educators and all levels of government is needed to encourage greater valuing of older Australians and their carers.
Introduction

The challenges arising from Australia’s ageing population are well-documented, with policy debate and public discourse predominantly focused on the related economic and fiscal implications. This framing contributes to the devaluing of older people and those who care for them. Much of the public conversation fails to recognise and positively frame the dividends arising from an ageing population. These include the economic, namely the enormous potential for increased employment, and the social, namely the community benefits and intrinsic rewards which flow from including and valuing of people of all ages.

In the past decade, as described in Institute Insight Two, the health care and social assistance sector has risen to be the largest provider of jobs in Tasmania and the second largest economic contributor. This growth is partly driven by the rapid ageing of Tasmania’s population. Over the next five years, a third of new employment growth in Tasmania will be in the care sector. Additionally, given the age profile of the current aged care workforce, considerable replacement labour will also be needed to supplement retiring members of the workforce.

Attracting thousands of additional workers needed to meet demand for aged care services in the coming decades will require a dramatic shift not only in employment conditions and training opportunities but also in the portrayal, status and desirability of such roles.

Employment boom for Tasmania

The Productivity Commission estimates that more than 3.5 million people will be using aged care services in Australia by 2050, requiring a quadrupling of the national workforce. The Commonwealth Government Department of Jobs and Small Business projects that employment in Tasmania will grow by a total of 13,595 to May 2022. Over a third of the employment growth will be in the health care and social services sector (around 5,262 new jobs).

However, this projection is for new jobs only and does not take into account the need for labour replacement for existing roles. As detailed in Institute Insight Two, additional employment demand will result from ageing workforces. More than half the workforce in six of the 19 Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) industry sectors in Tasmania is aged over 45 years.

This includes the health care and social assistance sector, in which 54.6 per cent of workers are aged over 45. Of the 30,683 Tasmanians employed in the health care and social assistance sector, almost four in five are female (79.4 per cent) while only eight per cent of workers are aged between 15 and 24 years.

Across all sectors in Tasmania, approximately a third of the current workforce (33.9 per cent) is aged over 50.\(^1\) Over the next 13 years, around 83,500 Tasmanians will leave the workforce, based on the average recent retirement age of 62.9 years.\(^2\) This scenario will create greater demand for employment, a reversal of the situation in Tasmania of the last four decades which contributed to the persistent net interstate migration losses. Not only will employment demand increase as a result of the need to replace retiring workers, it will also increase to service the needs, and changing consumption patterns, of a larger, older population for at least the next four decades.

\(^1\) ABS, Labour Force, Australia, Detailed - Electronic Delivery, Feb 2018, Cat. No 6291.0.55.001
\(^2\) ABS, Retirement and Retirement Intentions, Australia July 2016 - July 2017, Cat. No. 6238.0

The age profiles of the health care and social assistance industry sub-sectors provide an indication of where replacement labour will be required in the short to medium term. Over a quarter (25.3 per cent) of the healthcare and social assistance sector is employed in the hospitals sub-sector and one fifth (20.0 per cent) in aged care and residential services. For 14 of the 19 industry sub-sectors, more than half of their workforces were aged at least 45 years of age at the time of the 2016 ABS Census of Population and Housing. For the largest employing sub-sectors, 53.1 per cent of workers in hospitals and 62.0 per cent of workers in aged care and residential services were aged 45 years or older. All of these workers are likely to retire within the next 15 years, further increasing the need for qualified and skilled people to work in the growing sector.

### Table 1. Health care and social assistance sector workforce, Tasmania, 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Share of sectoral workforce</th>
<th>Number aged 45 and over</th>
<th>Percentage aged 45 and over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals (except Psychiatric Hospitals)</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>4,120</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged Care Residential Services</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>3,809</td>
<td>62.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Social Assistance Services</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>2,635</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Practice Medical Services</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>1,343</td>
<td>62.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Care Services</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Allied Health Services</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>56.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental Services</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathology and Diagnostic Imaging Services</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist Medical Services</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>61.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Assistance Services, nfd</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>56.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical and Other Health Care Services, nfd</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>1,286</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Changing the conversation around older Australians and aged care workers

In order to meet the demand for workers in health care and social services, more than 5,000 new workers are needed in Tasmania by 2022, and a tripling of the workforce (to almost 830,000) nationally will be required by 2050. Recruiting this large number of new workers may be difficult, especially as employment demand across multiple sectors increases.

Changing the conversation about older Australians and their carers in politics, the media and wider community is important if demand is to be met. Encouraging more positive rhetoric about ageing and aged care will help in attracting passionate workers allowing them to pursue meaningful careers.

There are few ‘good news’ stories about aged care work, or about older people. A familiar theme is of the ageing population as a “silver tsunami”, causing a “greyquake” of economic and social problems. Older people, particularly those who rely on various forms of welfare, are often portrayed as needy or undeserving. Direct care workers in aged care receive low wages, the work is physically and emotionally demanding and their relatively poor status in the community reinforces the ageism described above.

A Tasmanian study has found quality of care and the health of support relationships can also be impacted by negative commentary around ageing and aged care. The detailed study, conducted between 2012 and 2015, explored workers’ and clients’ experiences of aged care. The participants included 10 aged care workers and 8 aged care recipients, living or working in private homes, independent living units or residential facilities in Tasmania. The study was conducted over a 10-month period, involving multiple interviews with participants and observation of service encounters, with participants also encouraged to take photographs to capture aspects of their experiences of aged care. The material gathered provides a rich source for analysis of how workers and clients experience aged care.

The study provided evidence that adverse perceptions and portrayals can damage the relationships between older people and care workers, as well as between provider organisations and their staff and clients. One outcome can be the demeaning treatment of clients and of workers. Some participants in the study described encounters that were bereft of recognition of their emotional or physical needs. Aged care clients told of being infantilised or treated as “old and stupid”, as one participant put it, by organisations or workers. One aged care facility resident was infuriated by being treated “like an invalid” and “like a child”, and railed against celebrations at which “you need balloons and hundreds and thousands”. At the same time, inadequate staff numbers and ‘efficiency’ strategies that applied in some facilities meant, as one worker put it, “it feels like [residents] are a commodity”.

Factoring human value into the aged care funding model

Improving wages is among measures proposed by the Productivity Commission\(^1\) to increase worker recruitment. This is supported by interviews with sector workers, conducted for the 2016 National Aged Care Workforce Census and Survey. Wages are important, but workers repeatedly place wages lower than intrinsic rewards when asked about their reasons for entering the aged care sector. The primary motivation for about half of those interviewed for the Census and Survey was “an active interest in aged care work”, a desire to “care for the elderly”, or that they derived “enjoyment from directly working with people”. Further, direct care workers most frequently described the “close relationships and interactions they had with their clients” as the best things about the work.

In the Tasmanian study, workers and clients both spoke of poor or absent consultation about service provision, a deficit that implies they had nothing to contribute to decisions that impacted on their daily lives. Some workers also felt demeaned by administrators who ignored their extensive experience and knowledge of clients. It left them believing that, as one worker put it: “There is no respect for us”. This was compounded by instances in which clients’ or workers’ requests for changes to support regimes were ignored by provider organisations or met with remarks that aged care funding was not a “lolly jar” or “candy store” from which one could choose additional supports. These metaphors position good aged care as a luxury, rather than a human right, necessary for living an ordinary life. And they reflect discourses in the wider society and in policies that belittle, stigmatise or discredit aged care workers and clients.

However, relationships of respect and recognition were evident in the Tasmanian study, and they were linked with better quality care, as well as greater satisfaction for both workers and clients. Those workers and clients who could offer one another such respect and recognition had mutually beneficial interactions. One worker described his own experience:

**By talking to the residents, I’m trying to learn about them. And for them to teach me something as well; to get something back, but also, so then you can make a connection.**

Clients and workers seemed to understand that a service encounter was an opportunity to support and sustain one another, and in doing so, they built mutual self-confidence and self-esteem. As an aged care client put it, she and her favourite worker were “kind of like very co-creative and like sort of like that old saying—a well-oiled machine. […] we just slot in”. Both people in these successful relationships were attentive to one another’s needs: each made it clear that the other person was valuable and valued. One client expressed this as appreciating workers who were “in a space where she’s really caring, authentically caring, about me”, and workers too sought this kind of authenticity, speaking of working for “genuine engagement”.

Empowering aged care workers

Successful client-worker relationships identified in the Tasmanian study were underpinned by mutually caring and strengthening interactions.\(^1\) The workers in this category were all working towards higher qualifications, and all had supportive relationships with family or friends, and with clients. These social supports and capacities seemed to enable them to resist discourses that portrayed aged care workers or clients as failing, low status, or undeserving.

However, aged care workers and clients are not all supported by networks of friends or family, or able to pursue additional qualifications, and many are mired in negative community and policy discourses. This suggests several avenues for positive change. Supportive management, adequate aged care funding, positive organisational values, and effective workplace policies and procedures could improve care, as highlighted in the 2016 Aged Care Workforce Census and Survey. Further, the Tasmanian study suggests that the emotion and relationship work that sustains good aged care needs to be factored into funding and deployment models, as well as into organisational human resources policies.

Most importantly, the first challenge is to change the public and policy discourse to one in which workers and older people are respected and recognised as both major assets in our community and essential to the social fabric. Government (and sometimes organisational) policy demands for ever-more narrowly efficient provision, policies that deny the role of relationship, and providers’ dismissal of requests for essential additional support are incongruent with such respect and recognition. Greater valuing of older people and of workers in the health and social care sector are essential if the rights and wellbeing of older people and those who support them are to be ensured.\(^2\) The following recommendations are made with this in mind.

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Wages for aged care workers need to reflect their skills/experience and a career path is essential if younger people are to be recruited into the sector.

Policy makers, service providers, industry bodies and training organisations need to acknowledge and support the human need for relationships when preparing and supporting workers and clients.

Research is needed into the quality and satisfaction impacts of so-called emotional labour in aged care, for workers and clients, so this element can be costed. Training and wages should reflect the role of emotion and relationships in aged care work.

In the 2016 Aged Care Workforce Census and Survey (2017), Mavromaras et al. argue the use of emotional labour is “productive and should be recognised as a set of skills required for undertaking care work”.

The wider Australian community should be encouraged to demand an aged care model that supports the rights of workers and clients to be respected, and to lead ordinary satisfying lives. As a first step, policy makers and organisations, as well as the media, need to change the way older people and aged care workers are portrayed, to ensure such discourses are inclusive and non-discriminatory.

Guidelines for reporting on older people and aged care workers are needed, potentially based on the successful Mindframe National Media Initiative for mental illness, reflecting the important role media outlets play in influencing social attitudes. COTA Tasmania and University of Tasmania researchers are pursuing the development of such a framework for older people, aimed at reducing discrimination and stigma.

While there are considerable economic and fiscal challenges attached to ageing populations, there are also opportunities. The ageing population and workforce augurs well for increasing labour force participation and employment, and reducing unemployment across Australia and in Tasmania specifically. Growth in new and expanding industries to cater for the needs of an older population will create employment demand in Tasmania, as will replacement labour, particularly in the health care and social assistance sector. Further, longer-living populations mean more opportunities for the development of networks of rich, mutually beneficial relationships across society. However, the ability to respond to these changing social and labour market opportunities will be dependent upon the skills individuals in the population possess as well as the attitudes and values placed on ageing and on working in the aged care sector.

Lisa Denny is a demographer and a Research Fellow with the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of Tasmania.

Dr Susan Banks is a lecturer in Sociology at the University of Tasmania and an affiliated researcher with the Institute for the Study of Social Change, whose work focuses on aged care and the participation and inclusion of people from marginalised groups.