

Inquiry into aged care a chance to break the fear and silence



Lyndoch Living CEO Doreen Power cheering on from the stands during the 2019 May Racing Carnival. Image: Lyndoch Living/ Racing Victoria.

Carol Altmann – The Terrier

This week will be a reckoning for aged care across Australia and I can hope it blows the lid right off what is a national disgrace.

We only have to look at our own neck of the woods to see how little official outrage there is to what should be unacceptable.

It's more than two months since The Terrier revealed an [outbreak of scabies](#) within Lyndoch Living, our much-loved,

community-owned aged care home in Warrnambool.

When whistleblowers revealed scabies in [a Whyalla nursing home last November](#), *A Current Affair* and a South Australian MP were on the doorstep demanding answers.

It's also more than a year since I wrote about staff tearing up sheets and towels to use as facewashers, and more money being spent on consultants and lawyers than on food for residents.

More than a year has passed since I revealed a family member of a resident was sleeping on the floor next to her mother for seven days because her mother had had a series of falls and there was not enough staff to keep an eye on her.

At the same time, Lyndoch senior staff, right up to the CEO, and senior board members, were attending the May Races.

It's also a year since a leaked copy of a staff survey revealed [serious allegations of bullying and intimidation](#) at Lyndoch that went right to the very top.

It's well over a year since I first wrote about the steady stream of staff who were leaving Lyndoch, sometimes after decades of service, because of alleged bullying, being "targeted", or given little option to resign and – if they are lucky – given a payout to sweeten the blow. I call it "keep quiet" money.

Is that sort of thing still happening? Yes. Yes, it is.

It's eight months since we learned two architects from Melbourne were visiting Lyndoch Living despite the "ring of steel" Covid-19 lockdown in that city.

Lyndoch [denied they were even](#) from Melbourne.

It's 18 months since we learned that the community was no longer welcome to become members of Lyndoch: every single

membership application from the general community has been rejected, including that of our now Mayor Vicki Jellie.

Board member positions are no longer advertised.

The annual general meeting is no longer advertised.

Has there been an outcry from the board at this lack of inclusion? No.

Regardless, we have still unpicked the fact that Lyndoch has recorded a series of deficits these past five years and will borrow money from residential bonds (as the current laws allow it to do), to fund its \$100 million masterplan.

We also recently learned, thanks to [two former Lyndoch workers who peeled back the lid](#), that Lyndoch was gobbling up to 44 per cent in management fees for home care packages. (Again, the laws currently allow these fees.)

And this still doesn't touch on what I haven't been able to publish, because Lyndoch is litigious and I have to pick my way through a minefield to report even this much.

Our local political leaders know about most – if not all – of the above. Some of them have even met personally with those directly affected.

And yet, perhaps despite the best of intentions, nothing has come of it.

That may change after this week.

This week will see the public release of the findings of the Royal Commission into Aged Care and the federal government's initial responses.

The sad and infuriating story of what people are expected to “put up with” – as aged care residents, aged care staff, the residents families and the wider community – will be laid

bare.

It will no doubt emphasise the need for better staffing ratios, better pay, better training and working conditions, better scrutiny of those in positions of responsibility, greater transparency around funding and fees, and why aged care residents should never be seen as “customers”.

But I also hope this inquiry exposes why so many people connected to aged care feel disempowered from speaking up and out about what they know, because they fear the repercussions.

I can tell you that fear and silence around Lyndoch Living is very real, even if not everyone is touched by it.

I know it, several GPs around Warrnambool know it, several lawyers around Warrnambool know it. Our local MPs know it. The families and friends of those directly affected know it.

The release of the Royal Commission findings is our chance as a whole community to speak up for those who can't do so themselves.

This was the promise the community made to Lyndoch when it was first built more than 60 years ago: first and foremost it would protect and care for the elderly and frail, and those who look after them.

Now is the time to make good on that promise.



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