

Proposed new mandatory training manual for aged care volunteers

A Dementia Australia submission

Introduction

Understanding dementia in the context of volunteer roles and responsibilities in the aged care sector

In 2025, there are estimated to be 433, 300 Australians currently living with dementia including an estimated 29,000 people living with younger onset dementia.¹ An estimated 1.7 million people in Australia are involved in the care of someone living with dementia.²

Recent surveys conducted by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and Dementia Australia show that community awareness and understanding of dementia remains limited. The inaugural 2023 AIHW Dementia Awareness Survey asked more than 5,400 Australians what they knew about dementia and their attitudes towards people living with the condition. The broad finding of the survey was: 'Generally, Australians know little about dementia.'³ The survey highlighted that misconceptions about dementia persist, including the erroneous belief that dementia is a normal part of ageing. The survey concluded that there was a clear need to improve the Australian community's knowledge of the condition.

These findings are consistent with results from Dementia Australia surveys over the last decade, showing an ongoing lack of awareness and understanding about dementia in the Australian community.

¹ Dementia Australia (2023) Dementia Prevalence Data 2024-2054, commissioned research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

² Dementia Australia (2023) Dementia Prevalence Data 2024-2054, commissioned research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) Dementia in Australia, Australian Government, 'Dementia Awareness Survey', <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/dementia/dementia-awareness-survey/contents/about>

A Dementia Australia report on Australian attitudes and beliefs found that while there was increased awareness and empathy over the past decade, two thirds of survey respondents were not confident about their knowledge of dementia.⁴

This lack of awareness is at least in part because, unlike a physical disability, the cognitive and other changes that are associated with dementia are often under recognised or rendered 'hidden' or 'invisible.' People living with dementia relate the common experience of being told that they 'can't possibly have dementia' because they do not appear, speak or act in a way that corresponds with community expectations or understanding of the disabling nature of the condition.⁵

"If you just saw them and didn't know them, how would you even know if they had dementia?" (Australian resident with no lived experience of dementia).⁶

The invisible nature of a cognitive disability and the attitudinal and other societally imposed barriers mean people living with dementia can experience stigma, discrimination and other challenges when undertaking daily activities and engaging with people in the broader community.

A policy perspective on training for aged care volunteers

Two in three people with dementia are thought to be living in the community.⁷ 54% of people living in permanent residential aged care have dementia.⁸ It is critical that understanding of dementia as a disability and reducing stigma associated with the condition is improved in the health and aged care sectors, and the broader community.

Dementia Australia advocates for a comprehensive approach to building a dementia-capable workforce across all domains of the health and social care sector to provide quality care and support to people living with dementia. This requires a range of measures, including the need for dementia education and training across the disability, community, and aged care sectors.

⁴⁴ Dementia Australia. Dementia Action Week Discrimination Survey (2019) 5,767 valid responses collected from people living with dementia, families, carers, volunteers, health and aged care professionals, and people not directly impacted by dementia.

⁵ Former CEO of Alzheimer's Switzerland Birgitta Martensen's account of her recent diagnosis includes the most recent and compelling example of this. <https://www.alzint.org/news-events/news/my-life-with-alzheimers-disease-living-better-with-a-diagnosis/>

⁶ Dementia Friends & Dementia Friendly Communities Program. Exploratory report, Kantar Consultants, 2019

Content and conditions for the Mandatory Training Manual for Aged Care Volunteers

Dementia Australia supports in principle the proposal to develop a Mandatory Training Manual for volunteers in aged care and agree that this should constitute the minimum training requirements for all aged care volunteers. We believe that volunteers in the aged care sector should be appropriately trained to provide support for older people safely, respectfully, and inclusively. The training will ensure aged care volunteers understand and comply with their responsibilities and obligations under the new Aged Care Act and the Aged Care Quality Standards.

A Mandatory Training Manual would embed consistency across the sector, ensuring providers and volunteers clearly understand the roles and responsibilities associated with volunteering.

We believe the broad format of the proposed training modules is appropriate. Short, self-directed online modules with supporting downloadable content including in languages other than English, offers volunteers an appealing and accessible way of understanding the key issues and their responsibilities in engaging with older people.

However, we disagree in two key areas: the proposed module content topics and conditions under which training should be undertaken. We make two recommendations accordingly.

We strongly recommend that the Mandatory Training Manual include a module on dementia awareness and understanding. We believe dementia knowledge and understanding must be prioritised and represents a more important imperative than some of the other proposed modules.

Volunteers play a critical role in aged care settings in facilitating meaningful activities, providing companionship, and contributing a vital source of social care and support in a range of other ways. The need to improve knowledge and understanding about dementia pertains equally to individuals volunteering in the aged care sector as it does to aged care workers.

Volunteers in aged care regularly engage with people living with dementia in both home and residential aged care settings. Dementia Australia believes that a module on dementia awareness should comprise basic information about dementia, typical dementia types and symptoms, the impact of the physical and social environment, understanding and responding appropriately to changed behaviour and how to provide individualised support.

The consultation paper outlines how mandatory training will ensure volunteers:

- provide person-centred and rights-based support
- are aware of safety protocols and compliance requirements to keep older people in a safe environment, free from mistreatment and harm
- have the confidence to undertake the volunteer role respect and support older people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

Dementia Australia believes volunteers would not fulfill the above criteria and be competent and confident to undertake their role unless a dementia awareness module was a key part of their training requirements. A dementia awareness module would provide volunteers with the necessary knowledge and skills and have the following benefits:

- Volunteers would feel more confident in their interactions with people living with dementia
- People living with dementia would experience improved understanding and support that would decrease or prevent feelings of anxiety, fear, frustration, and confusion.
- Confident, dementia-educated volunteers would contribute to reduced incidences of changed behaviour, improving participation in volunteer run activities and supporting the wellbeing of people living with dementia and their family members and carers.
- Improve the overall experience of people living with dementia and carers when receiving health or aged care services.
- Volunteers might move into paid employment with knowledge and skills about dementia and an attitude that values dementia training and education.

Stigma, misconceptions, and lack of dementia awareness can lead to inappropriate interactions, ineffective support, and even harmful impacts on wellbeing. Conversely, well-informed, dementia-competent, and confident volunteers can make a significant contribution to improving the health, wellbeing and social support for people living with dementia in the aged care sector.

In the consultation paper, we note the current recommendation for volunteer training to be legislated as a condition of registration for providers in registration categories 4, 5 and 6 and highly recommended for all volunteers regardless of the provider's registration category (p 5 & 8). Dementia Australia believes it is vital that any person engaging directly with someone living with dementia in an aged care setting should receive dementia awareness training. Our second recommendation is that dementia awareness training is mandatory for volunteers working with providers in all registration categories.

A provider perspective on training for aged care volunteers

Dementia Australia is a provider of aged care services under Categories 1, 3 and 4. The following observations are provided from a provider perspective following consultations with the National Managers of our Client Services and Volunteer teams.

The content of the five proposed modules does not appear responsive to different aged care settings and is more focussed on volunteering responsibilities in residential aged care settings. Imposing training that is irrelevant or onerous risks discouraging volunteers from taking up the role and potential increase in the attrition rate for incumbent volunteers.

As a service provider in Categories 1, 3 and 4, we suggest that knowledge about SIRS is not something that volunteers in these settings would be required to manage directly and is not in the broad remit of volunteer responsibilities. Training about recognising when an incident occurs, open disclosure principles and the importance of maintaining open communication with clients is relevant. Awareness of when and how to contact the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission if a volunteer has concerns about provider actions is also important in this context.

From a provider perspective, there are a range of topics that we would recommend that are as relevant as the proposed five mandatory module topics. These include dementia awareness and understanding, trauma informed and culturally safe approaches to care, understanding wellness and reablement and recognising and responding to changes in an older person.

We believe a clearer definition of mandatory training is required. Page 5 of the consultation paper states: 'Under the new Act, aged care worker (including volunteer) training will be legislated as a condition of registration for providers in registration categories 4, 5 and 6 ... but it is **highly recommended** all volunteers undertake the proposed training, regardless of the provider's registration category.' On page 8 it states: 'The training is mandatory for all volunteers engaged with a registered aged care provider in a funded aged care setting.'

It is stipulated on page 7 of the consultation paper that 'Providers **must** maintain detailed records of volunteer training in accordance with regulatory requirements under legislation including dates, content, and attendance. This includes induction training, ongoing education, and any specialised modules relevant to the volunteer's role.' More detail on the assessment process would be helpful i.e. how will the mandatory training be assessed or accredited?

As a related concern, could there be a process for accrediting volunteers via an organisation's own internal training modules if they are covering the same ground and are compliant with the proposed Aged Care modules? Dementia Australia currently provides volunteer training that covers a range of topics including diversity and inclusion and the Aged Care Code of Conduct.

We would be interested in clarification on the timeline for completion. Can volunteers undertake the mandatory training modules when commencing their role or does the training have to be completed in entirety prior to commencing as a volunteer?

As a provider, we support the proposed 'light touch approach' that includes self-paced, online, 15-minute module lengths. We also support a flexible approach that does not require all 5 modules to be completed in a single session, and other delivery features that accommodate different adult learning styles and linguistic differences, including group work and working in hard copy and offline modes. This will encourage volunteer engagement and successful training completion.

As a Registered Training Organisation, Dementia Australia provides dementia education and training courses in both accredited and non-accredited formats. Our **Professional development and training courses** offer a range of programs and tools for organisations and individual workers supporting people living with dementia.

Dementia Australia would be happy to work with the Australian Government to develop an appropriate training module in dementia awareness for aged care volunteers. We would also welcome the opportunity to provide more information or to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission in more detail.

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