

21 March 2005

Ms Pru Goward  
Sex Discrimination Commissioner  
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Department  
CANBERRA ACT

Dear Ms Goward

### CHALLENGE TO AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES OF AGING PARENTS

I read with interest an article in The West Australian on 12 February 2005, concerning your speech to the Families Matter Conference recently held in Melbourne.

I wholeheartedly agree with you that 'as the population ages, caring for elderly parents while working is set to become one of the biggest challenges Australian families face'. However, I believe the challenge is already upon us.

To explain my belief I will outline my personal circumstances.

1. My mother, aged 96, lives in her own home with care provided by my sister and me and various excellent caring services. My mother's medical conditions include Alzheimer's type dementia, high blood pressure and back problems which lead to walking instability. She has been offered places in hostels four times over several years but each time has refused to leave her home. Doctors, that is her geriatrician and general practitioner, have advised her that it would be in her best interests for her to accept a residential place in a hostel but my mother will not leave her home. Her doctors and I worry about her security and as she is living on her own she may have a fall and not be found for several hours. Last week my mother was classified 'high care placement' by the Aged Care Assessment Team from Fremantle Hospital.
2. I am 66 years old, have no medical problems but worry what will happen if, later in life, I am unable to look after myself. I am a widow, my husband died 16 years ago; I have three adult children; and no grandchildren. My children all live and pursue their careers in Victoria and New South Wales.

Maybe I will have some serious medical problems, I don't know. I do not want to be a burden to my children and I would not wish the problems and responsibilities that are involved in the care of my mother upon them or upon anyone.

3. Several of my female friends are in the same position that I am in and while we keep each other company it is not a situation that any of us feel out of the shadow of. Some of them are still working and some retired.
4. I worked for the University of Western Australia up until the end of 2002 and several times requested that the Union include in its policies clauses that would enable older workers to take special leave to care for elderly parents in times of crisis. Most of the secretaries working at that time were 'mature' women. The Union would not change its stance from a focus on employees with children. I was of the opinion that children can be looked after by a trusted carer whereas cantankerous elderly people are difficult to arrange care for.

My mother's medical and accommodation conditions causes me a great deal of stress. After I left work I took on the responsibility of her mid-day meals but I collapsed and could not continue doing this for her, I now visit her most days during the morning or afternoon when I know she will be alone. I wish she would agree to moving to a home as I consider she needs 24hour a day supervision. My mother's geriatrician also would like her to have the 24hour supervision but she will not move from her home and the doctors cannot make her leave. However, if she should have another fall which caused injuries requiring hospital admission then the geriatrician would not let her return to her home; after hospital treatment he would place her in a nursing home.

My situation is causing me anxiety and it is an anxiety that does not go away. My friends find themselves in the same situation. Our parents grew up in an era when a family member, usually female, remained unmarried, stayed at the parental home and looked after the parents until they died. That scenario does not happen today, instead family members are expected, by their parents, society and the government, to look after them, usually while the parent/s reside in the parental home. The aged parents that I am aware of do not want to leave their own home, they only move when a doctor forces them to move. In my case, the doctors do not wish to do this to my mother even though they worry about her welfare.

I wonder:

- is enough education being given to the ageing population of the virtues of retirement villages, hostel living or other types of accommodation. Perhaps this type of education could be aimed at the 50s+ age group outlining: the continuing desire of people to be self sufficient; the need to be aware that they will not retain robust health throughout the rest of their lives; recognition that they will possibly have to rely on others to provide daily care; that these carers may not necessarily be members of their family; that the care may not be given in their own home; and the need to maintain an ongoing happy family relationship throughout their lifetime. As members of this 50+ age group reach their 60s maybe they will be more open to community living and be more aware, possibly subconsciously, that external care may be in their best interest in their later life

The population is now coming to terms with the imposition of funding one's own retirement through superannuation. This Federal Government initiative has become obligatory

It is almost certainly too late to provide an information programme to the 70/80 year olds about community living and taking the caring burden off families. Perhaps if the slightly younger age group, the 50s+, could be made aware of possibilities and opportunities for them in their older years then your "triple squeeze" may be at least, reduced a little. The Federal Government provides assistance with a wide range of home help services with the aim of keeping the elderly in their own home. These services are a great help but still caring by the family is required

- I wonder if there were more hostels available for elderly people or people in need would this ease the situation on family carers
- could the formula for granting permission to establish hostels and nursing homes be enlarged thereby enabling more hostels and nursing homes to be built for the ageing population. The hostels I have visited in the course of placing my mother's name on their waiting lists have all been very pleasant, clean, had well appointed rooms and facilities, tidy gardens with areas for sitting amongst the trees and been well maintained. The accreditation system appears to be working very well
- I believe a "changed mindset" towards ageing and the needs of the aged ought to apply to both men and women and also employers. The stress on a family caring for an aged parent is traumatic, it usually now comes at a time when the family carer is not as active, fit or healthy as they were when younger. Currently it comes at a time when men and women are nearing the end of their working life or looking forward to a relaxed retirement, after they have brought up their own family and finished their working life. Caring can also divide families

Do you remember a few years ago it was reported, in the press, that a lady had arrived at a railway station in New South Wales by train from South Australia. The lady was left at the railway station. Her New South Wales

children who had been looking after could no longer continue to do so and it was reported they did not pick her up from the station. I do not know what happened to that lady. This is a severe example of the dilemma some families are finding themselves in today


- on the other hand, if the needs of the aged are promoted too widely and vigorously there is a danger that the 'cost effective' police will be upon us again. Several years ago I was aware of a proposed campaign to deny certain kinds of medication and life saving operations to those over 70 years of age. Bringing the attention of the public to ageing and the aged requires careful consideration and skilful planning

It is very worrying that these proposals of denial could even be contemplated. When a very premature baby is born it costs many thousands of dollars to keep the baby alive to even the normal birth date then during the child's lifetime it often requires operations and continuing use of drugs to remain alive. I do not understand this anomaly in society's thinking. Surely both have a right to a happy and fulfilling lifetime. There should be no choice between the newborn and the aged.

I do not have any answers to the vexed questions that you raise but I know I do not wish my children to have the responsibility and burden of providing care for me. My plan is to move to a retirement village or hostel, whichever is appropriate, at the age of 75 if I have medical problems and definitely to be living in one or other at 80. This way I hope I will be of the mind set to accept external care in my 'very' old age.

I believe the situation you describe is upon Australians now and like superannuation we need to prepare. We are living longer due to advances made in science and the environment, and I am sure, given how we have been forced to embrace superannuation we will prepare ourselves for a long and happy retirement if we are exposed to the knowledge of the challenges ahead of us.

Yours sincerely



BEVERLEY M PULS (Mrs)