

The Impact of Caring: not just physical health suffers



It is not news to carers that their own physical health suffers as a direct result of their caring responsibilities. Exhaustion, lifting, poor diet, ignoring symptoms of illness because it is just too hard to get to the doctor, the cost of treatment – the list of reasons for poor physical health is endless.

Less talked about and less well recognised is the impact of caring on carers' mental health.

We know carers are struggling with mental illnesses as a result of their caring responsibilities, not just from what carers tell us at Carers NSW, but from academic research.

The Wellbeing of Australians: Carers Health and Wellbeing, 2007, the largest ever survey into carers health and wellbeing (a result of a partnership between Carers Australia, Australian Unity and Deakin University) found startling results in measures of depression and anxiety.

The study found that 'Carers have the lowest collective wellbeing of any group we have yet discovered.' Further, the report states that 'Carers have an average rating on the depression scale that is classified as moderate depression.' Report findings include the fact that 'in the general population the wellbeing of people who are separated or divorced is some 5 points below the

normal range. The process of caring depresses this by another 16-19 points'(!) And we know that the separation and divorce rates increase for families where a family member has a chronic illness, disability or mental illness. The study also found a total of 20.6 per cent of the carer sample were unemployed. 'For those carers who are employed, over one third has a degree of worry about losing their job that depresses their wellbeing even further.'

Carers NSW commissioned research completed by Dr Deanna Pagnini, **The Carer Lifecourse Framework, 2008** found that factors impacting on carers' mental health include the relationship between the carer and care recipient, the nature of the care recipient's disability and the stage of the caring process, socio-economic factors, social support and coping strategies. This information provided a context for Carers NSW to develop the type of interventions appropriate to assist carers in various situations.

But our work is just a drop in the bucket. As the number of carers grows, including young carers, the mental health of all carers should be not just a private tragedy but a public health issue.

Carers NSW Board member, Christina Aggar, is a researcher at the University of Sydney. In her recently published work **Self esteem in carers of frail older people: resentment predicts anxiety and depression Christina Aggar, Susan Ronaldson, Ian D Cameron, 2011** Christina and her colleagues explored specific aspects of self esteem, and examined the relationship with caring anxiety and depressive symptoms in carers of community-living frail older people. The results indicate that those carers who resent having to care for their frail older relative are susceptible to anxiety and depressive symptoms.

But let's be clear about carer resentment – it is not, I believe, the result of 'rampant individualism' as a speaker at a recent seminar I attended called it – but rather has very sad and preventable causes. The carers in this study who scored higher on the "Resent having to care" item and so were found to have symptoms of depression and anxiety were wives, who co-resided with their care recipient, and did not receive home help or respite services! Co-resident carers were less likely to receive formal support, nor ask for it, due to feelings of guilt, loss of privacy and cost. Negative reactions to caring have

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Connect with Carers lunches

Carers NSW ran a series of networking luncheon events in six locations in New South Wales to connect with carers and service providers in May and June. The *Don't Be Careless – Connect with Carers* events were an opportunity for Carers NSW to meet with nearly 300 carers and representatives from organisations in Nowra, Dubbo, Newcastle, Coffs Harbour, North Sydney and Canterbury-Bankstown, and to increase awareness and understanding of carers and the caring role.

Carers NSW presented key information on its role in policy development and supporting carers, and outlined new programs that are available to carers and service providers. The events were also networking opportunities for carers, government representatives, and service providers to share their experiences and to raise awareness about services. Several carers and



A carer from the Newcastle event sent in this photo of daughter Frances and her pet also called Frances.

organisations have asked Carers NSW to assist them establish carer support groups, or to deliver training in their local areas.

The Minister for Ageing and Disability Services, Andrew Constance, attended one of the events and he was represented by Melanie Gibbons, Acting Speaker, at the Coffs Harbour event.

Every Australian Counts – 15 June Day of Action

On Wednesday 15 June 2011, some Carers NSW staff participated in the Every Australian Counts commuter campaign and handed out pamphlets to commuters at Martin Place Station.

Despite the cold, wet weather, the volunteer campaigners wanted to raise public awareness of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). In conjunction with the volunteers' effort, Channel Seven's Sunrise program showed pre-filmed footage to promote the NDIS.

An estimated 11,000 postcards and 6,000 pamphlets were distributed by campaigners across the state. The postcards directed people to the Every Australian Counts website and the pamphlets contained more information on the NDIS and the Productivity Commission's recommendations.

The Day of Action generated interest from commuters, who asked questions about the campaign and NDIS. The Every Australian Counts campaign now has over 33,000 supporters. To sign up to the campaign visit www.everyaustraliancounts.com.au



Volunteers from Carers NSW and NGOs during the Day of Action with John Della Bosca, NDIS National Campaign Director, in Martin Place.

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also been reported by carers who feel unprepared and ill-equipped for their role. Inadequate knowledge and receipt of little guidance in providing care and managing caregiving tasks has reportedly resulted in reduced time for self and a restriction in lifestyle. Carers, who experience frustration at having to sacrifice employment opportunities and leisure time, or who have feelings of abandonment and isolation, may also resent their caring role.

Christina and her colleagues found if caring is an unchosen role, anger and resentment can impact on the total caregiving situation.

That carers should have choices in their caring role, is a position strongly held by Carers NSW.

The evidence is in. How can we ensure carer mental health is front and centre in political policy making, service design and provision? There is much changing in the mental health sector right now at all levels. While we are working to inform politicians now is the time for you to contact your local member. You will have concerns of your own to be answered but examples of questions you can ask are 'We need more coping skills programs/support/services for carers throughout the state – what does your government plan to do?'

Laraine Toms
President