



I learn a lot when I get out and about and talk to people. I learn how little the general public knows about family carers.

I learn how parents of children with disabilities and chronic illness can sometimes find it offensive when I suggest that in addition to being parents, they are carers. I meet people who are quite adamant that caring for people with illness and disability should be just a family responsibility, not a responsibility of government or the community at large. I meet people who don't know they are carers.

Of course I respect all these views, but never miss an opportunity to explain why I think it is important for the general community to know, and care, about carers. Why does

it matter? Not just because carers save Australian taxpayers \$40 billion plus by providing unpaid care, but because in a civil society being aware of, and providing for people who are disadvantaged, is the right thing to do. It's a human rights issue. It's everyone's business.

Here are some of the conversations I have had recently.

A mother of a teenager with a disability I was talking to said to me 'I am a Mum, not a carer'. I told her that being a carer as well as a Mum in no way diminishes her role as a Mum. However, in addition to being a Mum, identifying as a carer would mean that she could join her voice with other carer voices to make a stronger case for better services, more supports, more choices for carers in their caring role.

I talked to a mother from a Chinese background who believed that families should look after their own family members with disability or illness. I am aware that for many cultural groups, and older Australians too, the belief that families should care for one another and not depend on the state or the community is strong. And of course this belief is to be respected. But reaching out to the community for help should not be a cause for shame or embarrassment. For our community, caring for a carer not only ensures better mental and physical health for that carer, it maintains and sustains the caring relationship. It has benefits for the carer, the cared for person the whole family and the community.

It is ANZAC Day in April. If there is one group of carers occupying my mind at the moment it is carers of veterans. Like many mothers and fathers of young children with disabilities or chronic illness, the fathers, mothers, wives and children of veterans very often don't see

themselves as carers. I was chatting recently to the ex-wife of a Vietnam veteran who had to leave her violent marriage. She had tried to look after her husband and keep the marriage together for many years after her husband's return, but eventually became overwhelmed and believed she had no choice other than to leave. Since Vietnam there have been many conflicts involving Australian service people, yet the high rate of psychological illness as well as physical injury suffered by these service people means that family members are indeed carers - a fact that is often overlooked - as are the needs of those carers. Wars have many casualties.

Recently a person asked me which group of carers Carers NSW focused on the most. Was one group of carers more deserving of our support than another?

The answer, of course, was no. Whether a person cares for a family member for 3 months or 40 years their need for support and services is real, immediate and deserving. It is our job at Carers NSW to support all carers. It is not our role to judge one caring situation as being 'worse' or more 'deserving' than another. Every caring situation brings its own grief, hardship, needs and rewards.

At a time when there is so much change in the social service sector we must make sure that who carers are, and what they do, is not overlooked. Don't miss an opportunity to talk about carers in your own conversations. For change to happen we first need community awareness.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laraine".

Laraine Toms
President