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DEBORAH HUISMANN

HOME COMFORTS

Aged-care facilities cannot accommodate those too young to be there, writes KARINA GRIFT

In December 2015, secondary school teacher Deborah Huismann was planning for Christmas. School had broken up for summer holidays, and she was looking forward to the festive season.

But Ms Huismann, 58, never made it to Christmas celebrations. On Christmas Eve she was rushed to intensive care and put in an induced coma while her organs started to shut down. She was put there by a scratch on her leg that became infected with necrotising fasciitis – a rare skin infection that can rapidly cause severe illness, even death.

Her recovery from the infection was slow and its impact lifelong. Doctors saved her leg, but she relies on a wheelchair to get around. By the following December, after eight months in a rehabilitation hospital, Ms Huismann was told she would have to move into a nursing home.

“I was just living a normal life and then to be told that you are going to live in an aged-care facility, it was devastating,” she says.

“There was nothing wrong with the place I was at, it was modern and new, it was very nice, but at the same time it was a horrible place to be in. I wasn’t their intended audience.”

Ms Huismann’s situation is common. There are about 6200 Australians under 65 living in nursing homes. In most cases it is because there is nowhere else for them to go.

The Summer Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation working to solve the issue of young people in nursing homes.

Summer Foundation CEO Luke Bo’sher says the biggest problem is that the aged-care model is not designed to encourage independence. Young people become bored and lonely, are rarely visited by friends and have limited access to family.

Mr Bo’sher says depression can then lead to a rapid decline in health and wellbeing.

“Access to the NDIS is a big step in the right direction,” he says.

“One of the biggest benefits is that the scheme will pay for aged-care fees for younger people. These fees can be upwards of \$30,000 ... so these people are getting a huge relief and have more options to leave aged care because their assets are not depleted while living there.”

He says equipping hospital discharge staff with the tools that will allow them to discharge people from hospital back to the community will reduce the risk of aged-care admissions. Helping aged-care providers understand how to best support their younger residents and connect them with the NDIS is also important.

But there are barriers to overcome. Summer Foundation research shows there has been a 5 per cent reduction in the number of young people being admitted to aged care in the past five years, but it also shows one in 20 young people in aged care who applied to the scheme were deemed ineligible.

Mr Bo’sher says those who are connected are facing challenges implementing their NDIS

plans, receiving adequate funding and that there is often a lack of expertise among NDIS planners and support co-ordinators about the needs of this group.

Youngcare is another not-for-profit organisation advocating on behalf of young people in aged care.

Youngcare CEO Anthony Ryan says lengthy delays in the transition process is one of the biggest hurdles for this group, alongside a lack of suitable housing options.

Mr Ryan says part of the problem is that the NDIS requires people to say where and how they want to live to get their funding, developers and investors want to build suitable housing for them but they can’t build it before the funding is approved.

“I think it’s brilliant what (the NDIS) is going to do, but at this stage ... there needs to be a focus on where there are lags, why the lags exist and how we can overcome them,” he says.

He is confident the NDIS is listening and expects current inefficiencies to be ironed out in the next 12 months.

For Ms Huismann, a smoother transition from hospital back to home would have made a world of difference.

She is happy now.

Earlier this year, she moved out of the nursing home to live with her sister in accessible housing in Daylesford.

“My life has changed 150 per cent. I am happy, living in my own home. The NDIS has made a huge difference,” Ms Huismann says. ●

For more information, visit summerfoundation.org.au or youngcare.com.au