COTA For older Australians

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Aged care visits must be restored and funded in Tuesday's Budget

The peak consumer body for older Australians, Council on the Ageing (COTA) Australia, today welcomed the Aged Care Royal Commission's special report into COVID-19 and called for dedicated funding in Tuesday's Budget to facilitate increased visits to people living in residential aged care – many of whom have not seen loved ones for more than six months.

COTA Chief Executive, Ian Yates, said he was pleased the government had immediately accepted all six recommendations of the Royal Commission; but he said the devil will be in the detail and government must move quickly to ensure they are fully implemented in ways that equally strengthen infection control and support the emotional mental and physical health and wellbeing of all residents.

"The report makes very sensible, achievable recommendations that recognise the need for a co-ordinated response to outbreaks and increased infection control by nursing home providers," Mr Yates said.

Mr Yates said COTA particularly welcomes the call for additional funding for staff to enable visits by conducting screening and assisting with infection control, including appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

"It's really pleasing that the report recognises and gives such high priority to quality of life and wellbeing of residents, which is as important as infection control – this is what COTA has advocated for throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, unfortunately often against strong resistance and even opposition.

"This sentiment is clearly articulated through the recommendations to increase the provision of staff to facilitate visits by family and loved ones, and for the increased provision of health and mental health services through the Medical Benefits Scheme, which must also be implemented immediately.

"Transparency about how this is delivered is critical. The Minister says the Government has already provided $450 million to providers who can use it to increase visits. Many providers did not use it for that. Not one more dollar should be put into residential care unless it is transparent and directly tied to these recommendations.

"Far too many older Australians have waited since March to see their loved ones. Many aged care homes remain shut despite the current visitor code requiring them to increase the number and quality of visits.

"The Royal Commission has identified the need to increase staff to facilitate this. We call on the Government to do so in next week's Budget."

Mr Yates said COTA was keen to strengthen the Industry Code for Visiting Residential Aged Care Homes during COVID-19 to facilitate an increased number of meaningful visits for residents in aged care, include workforce representatives and will also discuss with government whether the Code can be made mandatory, as many providers are ignoring it.

He said COTA also welcomes the establishment of a National Aged Care Plan for COVID-19 – including a requirement that it must "maximise the ability for people living in aged care homes to have visitors, maintain their links with family, friends and the community" as well as facilitating the use of Hospital in the Home programs and establishing protocols on appropriate transfers to hospital of COVID-19 positive residents.

"COVID-19 has presented unprecedented challenges for aged care providers. Many have met that challenge, unfortunately others have not and residents have paid a high price for that," Mr Yates said.

"Through today's report the Aged Care Royal Commission has recognised that the isolation of aged care residents must end, and that the pandemic demands an urgent, co-ordinated national response.

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COTA Australia is the peak policy development, advocacy and representation organisation for older Australians, representing COTAs in every State and Territory and through them over 500,000 older Australians.