

Senate Inquiry into Aged Care Service Delivery

**Response to consultation
August 2025**

Recipient

Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Dietitians Australia acknowledges all traditional custodians of the lands, waters and seas that we work and live on across Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and future and thank them for their continuing custodianship.

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About Dietitians Australia

Dietitians Australia is the national association of the dietetic profession with over 9000 members, and branches in each state and territory. Dietitians Australia is the leading voice in nutrition and dietetics and advocates for the profession and the people and communities we serve.

The Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) program provides an assurance of safety and quality and is the foundation of self-regulation of the dietetic profession in Australia. Accredited Practising Dietitians have an important role in aged care, such as in the assessment and dietary management of clients with chronic diseases and malnutrition, in the planning and coordination of food service within residential aged care homes and home delivered meal programs, and in the training of aged care sector staff.

This submission was prepared by Dietitians Australia, with contributions from its members and the Dietitians Australia Aged Care Reforms Reference Group.

Recommendations

1. Immediately release additional Home Care Packages or provide greater support for other programs to:
 - a. Address long waiting lists, urgent unmet dietetic care needs and prevent avoidable health decline among older Australians.
 - b. Support a sustainable dietetic workforce and enable necessary workforce planning for Accredited Practising Dietitians.
2. Prioritise access to dietetic services with Accredited Practising Dietitians to support older Australians in preserving and restoring wellness, managing chronic conditions and maintaining independence at home.

Discussion

Dietitians Australia appreciates the opportunity provided by the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs to highlight concerns regarding the current state of the in-home aged care sector. Although the delay of the Support at Home Program has allowed necessary time for providers to prepare for upcoming changes, it has also contributed to growing waitlists for older Australians, particularly when combined with the freeze on new Home Care Packages. These factors together have led to increased levels of unmet need across the community. Additionally, the prolonged implementation has created further challenges in workforce planning for dietetic service providers.

(a) The impact of the delay on older Australians waiting for support at home, including unmet care needs and the wellbeing of seniors and their carers

Recommendation 1a Immediately release additional Home Care Packages or provide greater support for other programs to address long waiting lists, urgent unmet dietetic care needs and prevent avoidable health decline among older Australians.

Recommendation 2: Prioritise access to dietetic services with Accredited Practising Dietitians to support older Australians in preserving and restoring wellness, managing chronic conditions and maintaining independence at home.

Nutrition support is important for many older Australians to maintain wellness, manage chronic conditions, and preserve or restore independence. Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are highly trained health professionals with the expertise to deliver evidence-based nutrition care to older Australians experiencing malnutrition, unplanned weight loss, swallowing difficulties (dysphagia), chronic diseases (such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, renal failure), and loss of muscle mass, among other health conditions¹. APDs play a critical role in helping older Australians remain safely at home and avoid premature transition into residential aged care.

The delay in implementing the Support at Home program has been coupled with the Government's decision to withhold additional Home Care Packages. This has contributed to growing waiting lists and an increased unmet need for older Australians. Information from the Home Care Packages Program Data Report indicates that the number of people on the waitlist for care at their approved care level has risen from nearly 83,000 in October-December 2024 to 87,000 in January-March 2025^{2,3}.

Lack of access to dietetic care has profound impacts, including but not limited to:

Malnutrition, unplanned weight loss and associated health issues

Malnutrition heightens the risk of falls, pressure injuries and premature mortality, while also contributing to increased rates of hospitalisation⁴. As a result, the wellness of older Australians is diminished, and costs rise across both the aged care sector and the broader healthcare system. Older people are particularly vulnerable to nutritional deficiencies, especially those with swallowing difficulties (dysphagia). In a study regarding the prevalence of malnutrition in older Victorians receiving home nursing services, 8% were found to be malnourished and 35% were at risk of malnutrition⁵. Timely dietetic care is vital for the prevention and treatment of malnutrition.

Preventable hospital admissions and increased reliance on emergency services

Without dietetic support, many older Australians may see their health decline or their chronic conditions become harder to manage. Preventative care from a dietitian can help to manage these conditions, reduce avoidable health complications, restore wellness, promote reablement and avoid reliance on care from hospitals or emergency services⁶.

Loss of independence and functional capacity

Optimal nutrition, guided by expert dietetic support plays an important role in maintaining muscle mass, cognitive function, and mobility. Delays in accessing dietetic care can accelerate the loss of independence and lead to earlier transition to residential aged care.

Urgent interim measures are needed to bridge the gap until the Support at Home program is launched. Enhancing access to dietetic services in the home and placing greater emphasis on dietetic care will strengthen the overall health and wellbeing of older Australians.

(C) the impacts on aged care service providers, including on their workforce

Recommendation 1b: Immediately release additional Home Care Packages or provide greater support for other programs to support a sustainable dietetic workforce and enable necessary workforce planning for Accredited Practising Dietitians.

The delay in implementing the Support at Home program has significant implications for the dietetic workforce delivering services through in-home aged care. Members of Dietitians Australia have already reported challenges under the current system, including limited funding, inconsistent referral pathways and financial strain. Continued delays to the Support at Home program, coupled with a freeze on new Home Care Packages, have required dietetic service providers to adapt their operations within an increasingly strained environment.

Although the dietetic workforce is well-placed to deliver essential support, the infrastructure to deploy and fund these services through in-home aged care remains inadequate. These systemic challenges have also made it increasingly difficult for dietetic service providers to recruit and train new staff, as well as retain experienced practitioners. The effects of the freeze on new Home Care Packages will not be remedied on 1 November 2025.

We urge the Government to take prompt action to ensure the sustainability of the dietetic workforce throughout the transition to Support at Home. This will help prevent the loss of experienced Accredited Practising Dietitians in aged care.

References

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