

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S FIRST AGED CARE COMMISSIONER

“This is a role that can help deliver great quality of care and quality of life for older people, and that’s what drives me. When faced with a challenge I relish the opportunity to unpack the problem, explore a viable solution and deliver a tangible outcome. I will do this with my eyes open and ears listening.”

Carolyn Cooper, Aged Care Commissioner

New Zealanders are living longer. By 2034, just over a fifth of our total population — around 1.2 million people — will be aged 65 years and over.

This is one of the challenges Carolyn Cooper, appointed Aotearoa New Zealand’s first Aged Care Commissioner, will face.

“It’s an honour to be appointed Aotearoa’s first Aged Care Commissioner,” said Carolyn, who says a big part of her role will focus on making sure older people’s rights to the best and most appropriate healthcare services are not undermined as the Government launches its largest, most fundamental reform of the health sector in decades.

“We all have the right to make informed decisions and give informed consent for health and disability services, and to receive an appropriate standard of care that meets our needs and upholds our dignity and mana. These rights cannot slide — which is why the timing of my appointment is critical.

“Some older people are part of our most vulnerable communities. I’m committed to advocating on their behalf and for their whānau, so they have confidence in the quality of care and quality of life as we transition through the health reforms,” she said.

Although many older people are living healthier lives for longer, demand for aged care services will increase. This will put further pressure on services that are already under strain from the legacy of managing COVID-19 and the transition to living with the virus.

Carolyn says aged care services are wide-ranging and include geriatric medicine, mental health for older people, dementia care, and palliative care, and also primary health care and general health services for older people, either in aged residential care facilities, or community support services providing home-based care.

Some services are more advanced than others in keeping abreast of their obligations to the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers’ Rights. The scope of the Aged Care Commissioner’s role is not limited to a particular age bracket, and Carolyn will work on behalf of all older people who may need access to aged care services.

“People age at different rates and in different ways. Older people are a diverse group. Some people may be under 65 years of age but live in a care home, or require home-based care,” said Carolyn.

Even prior to COVID-19 and the health reforms there were calls for greater oversight to drive quality improvement and protect older people’s rights when receiving aged care services. Carolyn says the current quality and safety system for the sector is fragmented, and can be complicated to navigate. Several reports have identified issues such as complexity of the complaints process, lack of visibility for services provided by home and community support providers, and people feeling fearful of repercussions from speaking out.

Carolyn says, “I bring a pragmatic approach to the challenges this sector faces to make a tangible difference through collaboration and initiating quality improvements, and I’m optimistic by nature so nothing much fazes me.”

Carolyn says she will work across the entire aged care sector to support the Government’s commitment to honour Te Tiriti, and to protect the rights and respond to the needs of older Māori and older people of all ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

“Our complaints processes must be culturally appropriate, accessible and meet the needs of our Māori communities. They must reach people who may be less likely to raise concerns about their care and ensure equity of access to quality health and disability services.

“I want to be a recognisable figure for older people to elevate their voices, and advocate on their behalf. I want to hear from them, their friends and whānau so they get access to the quality services and support needed to live well and have a great quality of life,” said Carolyn.

The Aged Care Commissioner is located in the Office of the Health and Disability Commissioner (HDC), the independent watchdog for consumers’ rights in the health and disability sector.

The role sits under the HDC and complements the work of other agencies that provide a broader focus on the well-being of all older people, including the Ministry of Health, HealthCERT, the Office for Seniors, the Human Rights Commission, the Retirement Commission, and the Ombudsman.

Carolyn believes the collaborative relationships HDC has with these agencies will be vital in her work to respond to emerging system-level issues, and to work together to address them.

“The breadth of my experience is real-world and people-centric having worked as a health executive across New Zealand and Australia. This will guide me in my work as the Aged Care Commissioner, to influence and provide leadership to the aged care sector and the wider health system to improve the overall experience of aged care services for older people.

“Primary health care providers form an integral part of the health and disability sector, and I look forward to working with them to drive quality improvement, and encourage collaboration and positive change across the sector.

“Fairness and doing the right thing have always been central to my approach and I carry these values into this role,” said Carolyn.

Timeline for appointment of Aged Care Commissioner

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| 2010 | Labour Party, Green Party, and Grey Power moot the idea of an Aged Care Commissioner to provide a voice for older people in quality of their care for health and disability services. |
| 2017 | Labour Party’s <i>Inquiry into Aged Care</i> raises need for an Aged Care Commissioner. |
| 2019 | Petition for establishment of an Aged Care Commissioner by Mark Sainsbury considered by Social Services and Community Select Committee. |
| 2020 | Establishment of an Aged Care Commissioner included in the Labour Party’s election manifesto. |
| Feb 2021 | Cabinet agrees to establish an Aged Care Commissioner, reporting to the Health and Disability Commissioner (HDC). |

- May 2021** Government allocates \$8.1million over four years in *Budget 2021* for the creation of the Aged Care Commissioner and its ongoing operation, and funding for HealthCERT to handle additional complaints.
- Aug 2021** Recruitment of an Aged Care Commissioner to sit under the HDC as a Deputy Commissioner commences.
- Feb 2022** Minister Ayesha Verrall announces the appointment of Carolyn Cooper as Aotearoa's first Aged Care Commissioner.
- Mar 2022** Carolyn Cooper starts at HDC in the role as Aged Care Commissioner.

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