Because pressure sores are most likely to develop on people who have limited mobility, elderly Australians in Aged Care are at particular risk. But pressure sores are preventable. In fact, pressure sores are easier to prevent than treat. Yet because of chronic understaffing in Aged Care, thousands of elderly Australians suffer from these painful injuries every year, sometimes leading to amputations and even deaths.

**FIRST, WHAT IS A PRESSURE SORE?**

Pressure sores (also called bed sores, pressure injuries or pressure ulcers) are areas of skin and tissue that are damaged due to constant pressure or friction. They usually develop where there are bones right under the skin. If a person has limited mobility and either lies or sits in one position for an extended time, the pressure on the parts of the body in contact with the surface (such as the shoulders, buttocks, ankles and elbows) can quickly cause pressure sores to develop. These can occur on the surface of the skin or be deep in the tissue.

**WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF PRESSURE SORES?**

Pressure sores can be intensely painful. At a minimum, they will undermine a person's health, mobility and ability to participate in normal activities. They can take a long time to heal and regularly reappear. Many sufferers, especially the elderly, require extended periods of hospitalisation. If not treated early and effectively, they can lead to serious, even life-threatening complications. These include:

- Abscesses
- Cellulitis (a bacterial infection of the skin and tissue beneath the skin)
- Osteomyelitis (infection of the bone)
- Sepsis (a potentially life-threatening complication of an infection)
- Squamous cell carcinoma (a type of skin cancer)
IDENTIFYING AND MANAGING THE RISK OF PRESSURE SORES.

While pressure sores can lead to serious, even fatal complications, they are highly preventable. For Aged Care facilities, it gets down to having enough staff to properly manage the risk of pressure sores developing and enough trained nurses to treat them early if they do develop.

PRESSURE SORE RISK FACTORS.

Many of the risk factors that contribute to the development of pressure sores are particularly relevant to elderly Australians in Aged Care. Those most at risk of developing pressure sores are:

- People with limited mobility who can’t move easily for themselves.
- People who have nerve or other problems that affect their ability to feel pain or discomfort.
- People who aren’t getting enough protein, vitamins and minerals in their diet.
- People subjected to prolonged wetness from perspiration, urine or faeces.
- People with diabetes or other conditions that affect their circulation.
- People who are elderly, especially aged over 85, because the skin usually becomes more fragile with age.

PREVENTING PRESSURE SORES.

Pressure sores are recognised Australia-wide as being highly preventable. Health services across Australia have adopted nationally approved guidelines for the prevention and management of pressure injuries that every Aged Care home should follow.

“A LOT OF PEOPLE IN AGED CARE GET PRESSURE SORES THAT ARE ABSOLUTELY PREVENTABLE.”

— GABRIELLE, REGISTERED NURSE

PLAN OF CARE FOR ANYONE AT RISK OF PRESSURE SORES

To prevent residents developing pressure sores, Aged Care facilities need a workforce with the right skills to identify the risk factors and detect early signs of pressure sores developing. Most importantly, they need to implement a Plan of Care, which focuses on:

- Relieving pressure on vulnerable areas. People with limited mobility need to be repositioned at least every two hours
- Reducing shearing and friction
- Ensuring good nutrition and hydration
- Ensuring the skin is clean and dry
- Daily skin care as well as inspection of the skin to check its integrity and ensure early detection
- Encouraging daily exercise

CONCERNED ABOUT A LOVED ONE OR RESIDENT?

Pressure sores are easier to prevent than treat, so a good management plan is essential for anyone in Aged Care. If you are at all concerned about a loved one and possible pressure sores:

1. Speak to the registered nurse and ask about a care plan.
2. Speak to the facility manager and ask them for a treatment plan.
3. If the facility doesn’t respond or you are still concerned, contact the Aged Care Complaints Commissioner at:

www.agedcarecomplaints.gov.au

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