

## Quality Nutrition in Aged Care: A Path to Enhanced Health and Wellbeing

The spotlight is now on the pivotal role of food and nutrition in aged care, with the anticipation of strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards set to improve the quality of care for consumers. A high-quality, nutritious diet is essential to the health and wellbeing of older people. The consequences of malnutrition and dehydration can be irreversible for older people and result in an increased risk of falls, fractures, pressure injuries, and infection.

The [Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety](#) reported concerning levels of malnutrition and dehydration in older people receiving residential aged care, due to poor food quality and food being perceived as unappetising. The Royal Commission also reported high levels of unplanned weight loss due to insufficient funding to buy and prepare nutritious food and insufficient staff to help those needing assistance with eating.

Food and nutrition were subsequently identified as an area of concern for immediate action by the Royal Commission. The Royal Commission recommended strengthening the requirements for quality nutritional provision during a proposed review of the Aged Care Quality Standards.

The Department of Health and Aged Care responded to the call for immediate action with the Basic Daily Fee supplement which, for residential aged care services, has now been absorbed into AN-ACC funding as the [hotelling supplement](#).

### **But, has the quality and variety of food and meals improved since this recommendation and funding?**

In five of the last nine [Sector Performance Reports](#) (SPRs) 'Food and Catering – Quality and Variety' ranked in the top 10 most common complaints received by the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (ACQSC) about residential aged care services. The most recent SPRs (October – December 2022 and January to March 2023) displayed detailed data on complaints broken down by the complainant group. In both reports, the most common category for complaints made directly by consumers was regarding the 'quality and variety of food and catering'.

The [Residents' Experience Survey](#) asks aged care consumers 'Do you like the food here?'. The results of this survey contribute the largest weighting (33%) to the calculation of a provider's [Star Rating](#). We analysed the results of Residents' Experience Surveys conducted by MOA members from January 2021 to May 2023 and found the question 'Do you like the food here?' was the only question where the majority of responses were 'most of the time' instead of 'always'. The question 'Do you like the food here' also had the highest percentage of responses for 'some of the time' and 'never' compared to all other questions analysed (Figure 1).

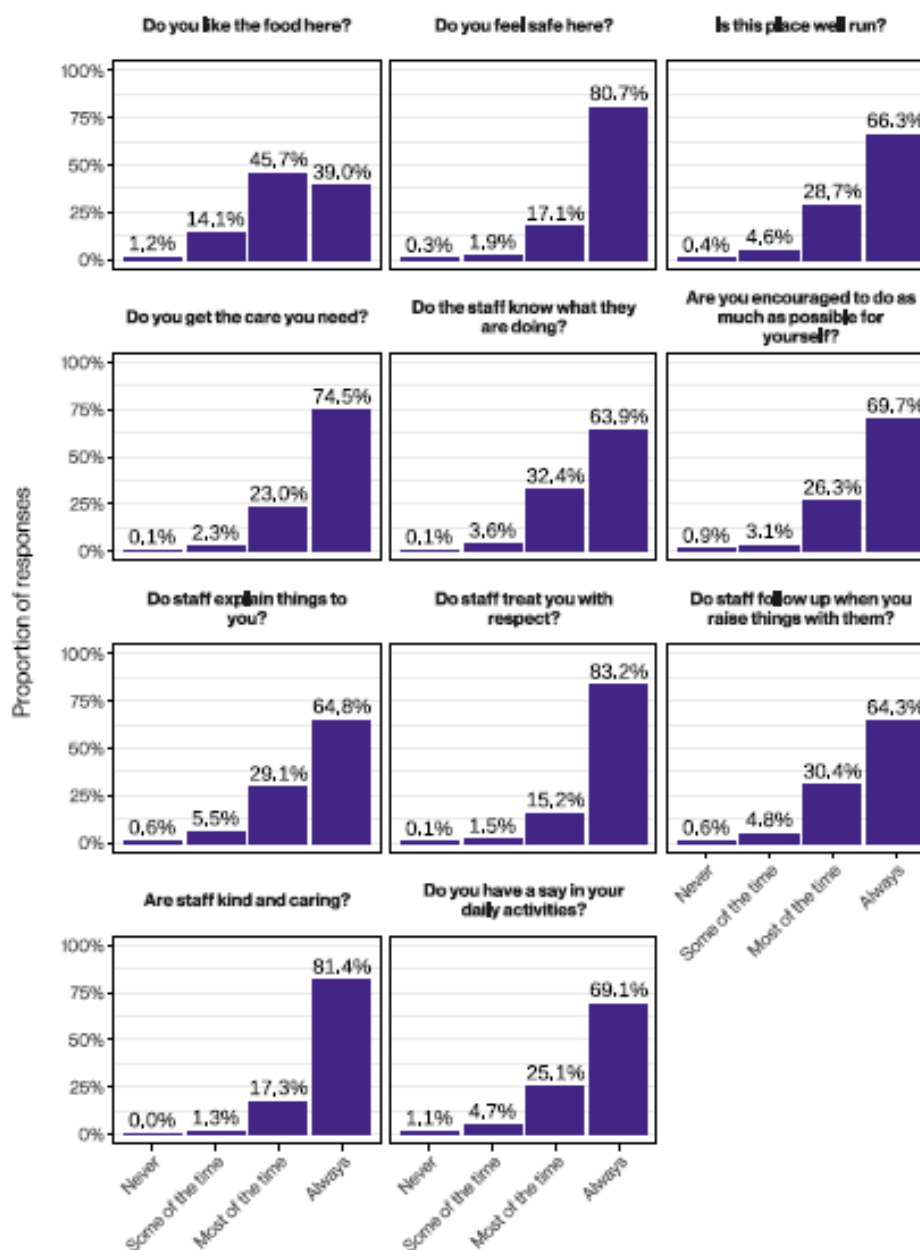


Figure 1: Prevalence of responses to resident experience survey questions.

MOA compared [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) (AIHW) consumer experience data (from 2017 – 2019) to MOA Residents’ Experience Survey results on five comparable questions and revealed very similar responses to the question ‘Do you like the food here?’ (Figure 5).

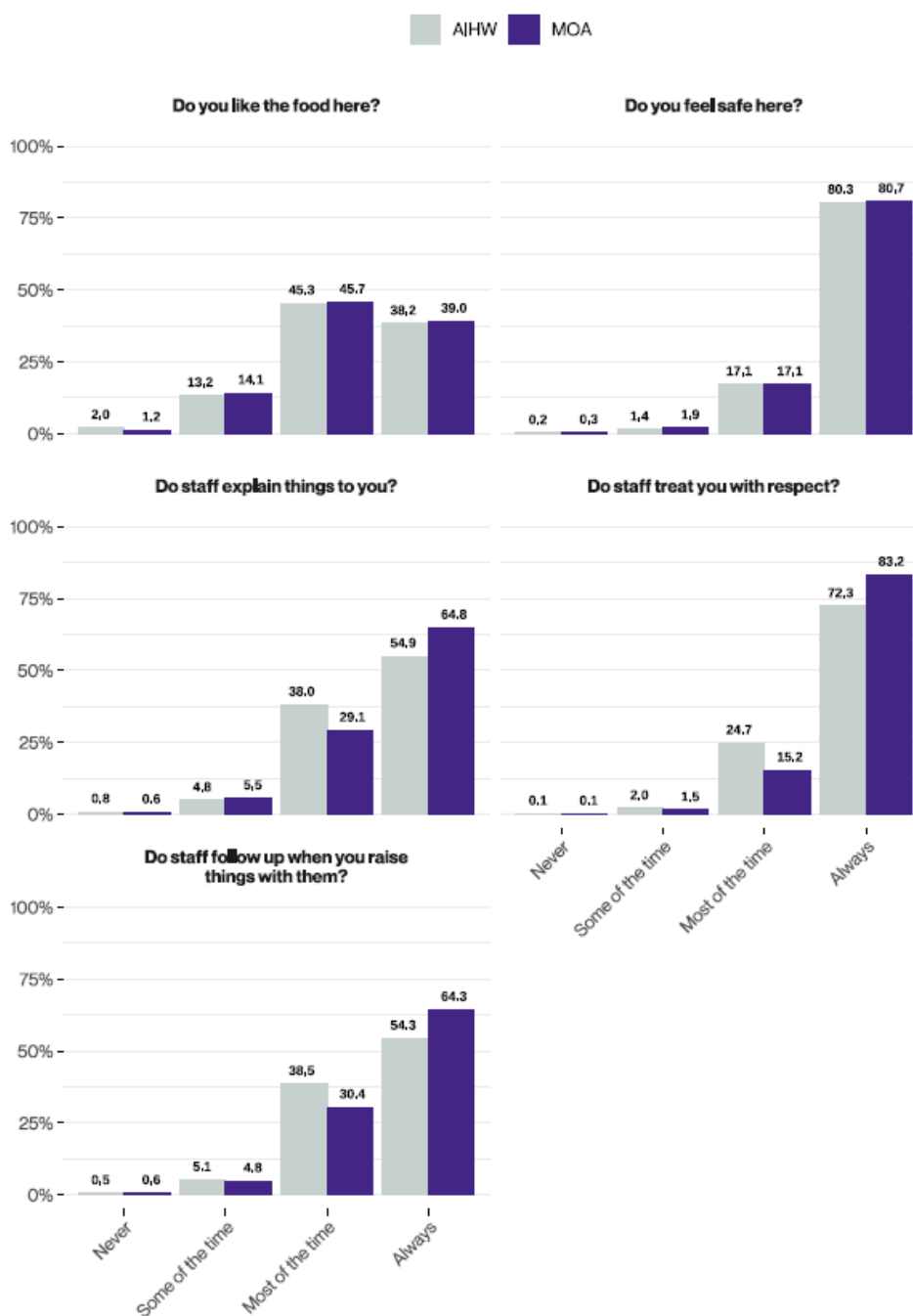


Figure 5: Comparing MOA members with the sector in terms of resident experience.

Responses were also similar for the question ‘Do you feel safe here?’, however, we found MOA members were exceeding previous sector performance, with an approximate 10% shift from ‘most of the time’ responses to ‘always’ responses, for all other comparable questions:

- Do staff explain things to you?
- Do staff treat you with respect?
- Do staff follow up when you raise things with them?

**Good job MOA members!**

Circling back to the question ‘Do you like the food here?’, we are seeing very similar responses in the 2021 – 2023 MOA data and the 2017-2019 AIHW data. This highlights an ongoing need to address

consumer satisfaction with food and catering in residential aged care settings. Improving the quality and variety of food and catering in residential aged care will not only improve the health and wellbeing of consumers, but it should also improve provider Star Ratings.

### 5 stars here we come!

An [informed choice about food, drink, and the dining experience](#) was identified as a primary reason for improved food and nutritional intake in residential aged care service settings. During August, MOA members had access to audit 4.4 – Meal Services, Nutrition, and Hydration, in which we highlighted supporting consumers to make informed choices about their food, drinks, and dining experience. We also strengthened the consumer pulse survey to facilitate specific actionable feedback on consumer choice, and food quality, variety, and quantity.

In November, MOA members will have another opportunity to seek more detailed feedback to identify continuous improvement opportunities when consumers are encouraged to complete our Food Satisfaction Survey.

### So, what else is the sector up to on this topic?

The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (ACQSC) has now acted on the Royal Commission's recommendation with the [Revised Aged Care Quality Standards](#); including a dedicated standard aimed at improving the quality of food, nutrition, and dining experiences in residential aged care – Standard 6: Food and Nutrition.

Other initiatives introduced by the Department of Health and Aged Care regarding [food and nutrition in aged care](#) include:

- *Strengthened, and mandatory, reporting requirements on food*
- *Partnering with the Maggie Beer Foundation to provide aged care workforce training and education*
- *Working with the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission to monitor food and nutrition in aged care, including through a dedicated Food, Nutrition and Dining Advisory Support Unit*
  - *Establishment of a "food hotline" and triaging calls based on the nature and level of risk to older people*
  - *Embedding dietetic clinical expertise to strengthen advice provided to consumers and providers*
  - *Supporting providers to build capability by linking them with education programs*
  - *Engaging Dementia Australia experts to promote nutrition and food enjoyment for people with dementia*
  - *Referring for up to 500 menu and mealtime assessments to be completed by accredited practising dietitians*
  - *Coordinating up to 720 provider spot checks annually, with 10% of spot checks of the highest risk services to have accompanying dietitians*

### Do we have any final advice for providers to action NOW?

Sure, download yourself a copy of the ACQSC's [Residential aged care food services discussion paper](#) and choose one of the recommended points of focus for quality improvement to get a head start on improving the quality and variety of food and catering, your consumers' health and wellbeing, and your overall Star Rating.