

Report misses reality of grandparent carers

by KIRSTY STEIN

GRANDPARENTS who care full-time for their grandchildren would no longer be able to access free child care under a Productivity Commission proposal.

The commission's draft report on childcare and early learning has sought further information on what effect withdrawing the subsidised care, in favour of a shift to means-tested care subsidies, would have on grandparent carers. Grandparents who are the recognised primary carers of their grandchildren can currently access up to 50 hours of free early childhood education and care each week.

The commission argued that under its streamlined system, grandparent carers would lose guaranteed free care, but most would be eligible for the highest rate of subsidy under a means tested arrangement, leaving those on the age pension to pay about \$8 a day for long day care.

Council on the Ageing NSW chief executive Jan Day said the report did not adequately grapple with the realities facing grandparent carers, who received very little financial support.

"Most grandparent carers are informal - they have not gone

through a process to make them legally recognised as formal grandparent carers and as a result they get little or no help with the cost of childcare or anything else," he said.

"Some informal grandparent carers live in fear of their adult children who have relinquished care of their children due to drug addiction or mental illness, and they want to fly under the radar.

"Others don't want to engage with Family and Community Services and expose themselves to a regime of caseworker visits.

"The report does not address the fact that the grandchildren who end up in the care of their grandparents have often experienced extremely difficult early childhoods.

"They often enter the care of their grandparents requiring help from educators, medical professionals or psychologists, along with access to childcare.

"This costs a great deal, and too often grandparent carers are unable to get any financial help to cover these costs."

The inquiry into childcare and early learning proposed a new funding system, with government assistance streamlined into a single, means-tested subsidy paid directly to childcare centres and

YOU NEED SPECIAL FRIENDS - Paula Tate with her twin granddaughters.

PAULA Tate, 59, and her husband, 63, then a policeman, raised one grandchild to age 16 and took on their twin grandsons, now 3, while she was still a successful business owner in Belmont.

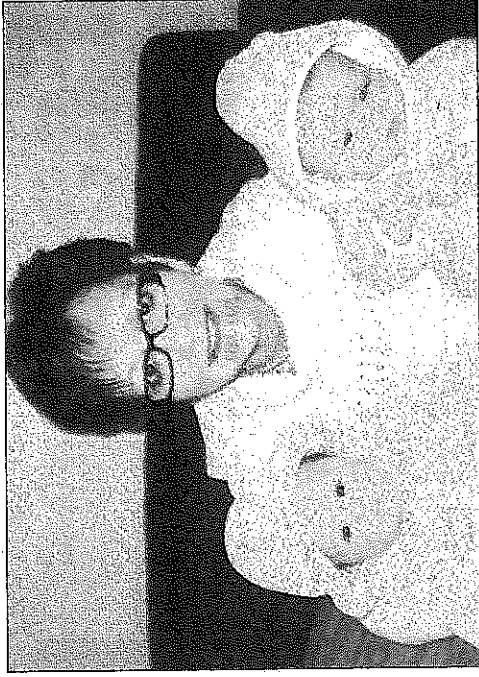
When they learned they would also be taking full-time care of twin granddaughters, now 17 months old, they knew things would have to change.

They sold Paula's business and moved out of Newcastle for the sake of the children, but say the loss of the grandparent child care benefit would be a major blow.

Paula and her husband use a child care centre for their grandsons and pay \$100 a fort-

qualified in-home carers.

The report found more than 1.4 million people identified in the latest census as providing unpaid care for children other than their own. Almost two-thirds of children aged up to 12 who attended informal care did so with a grandparent.



night for a casual carer while they do grocery shopping.

"It's a big thing - it takes everything we have," she said. "Everything has to be budgeted."

Before Centrelink and the pre-school realised she qualified for the grandparent benefit, Paula paid \$390 a fortnight for the boys' pre-school.

"My husband gets a police pension, and I pulled my whole life's savings from my super to build this house and give the children a life," she said.

Paula also receives a part parenting payment.

"I don't believe the government has a right to say 'We'll stop your support' when we

are saving the government so much money by taking on this role," she said.

"Being retired and caring for grandchildren is a lonely existence. Grandparent carers are not only financially responsible but physically, mentally and emotionally responsible.

"And how does a person of my age pull up in an iMac van at the front of one of our friend's places with four babies? It takes a special lot of friends."

Paula has a web page dedicated to her grandparenting experiences and to supporting other grandparent carers. ■ www.tinyblessings.com.au

now becoming a common part of the mix in supporting parents' return to work plans where childcare is unaffordable, not accessible or where the parents prefer extended family to participate in the child's overall development and wellbeing," the Playgroup Association of Queensland noted.

"Grandparents, especially, are