



Media release

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Nurses the key to caring for arthritis

Report demonstrates rheumatology nurses could be the answer for hundreds of thousands of Australians with inflammatory arthritis. Currently there is only one rheumatology nurse for every 45,000 people living with inflammatory arthritis – this must increase.

Around 1.7 million Australians suffer with chronic, inflammatory forms of arthritis, yet there is a severe shortage of the specialist nurses who are trained to help care for these patients.

It is estimated inflammatory forms of arthritis cost the Australian health system around \$2.8 billion in 2015.

According to a report commissioned by Arthritis Australia, there is just one full-time rheumatology nurse for every 45,000 people living with painful and disabling conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, psoriatic arthritis, gout and juvenile arthritis.

CEO of Arthritis Australia Ainslie Cahill said chronic, inflammatory forms of arthritis are a leading cause of disease burden and are also among the most common causes of disability and early retirement due to ill health in Australia.

“An increase in rheumatology nurses would mean quicker diagnoses, better psychosocial support for patients, improved quality of care, better patient outcomes and reduced health system costs,” Ms Cahill said. “Importantly, this research confirms that people who see a rheumatology nurse as part of their care are much more satisfied with all aspects of their care than those who do not.”

This story is familiar to Max Stoneman who spent 18 months undergoing tests before finally being diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis at the age of 19.

“I started getting worsening symptoms through years 11 and 12 at school. Initially we just thought it was growing pains and didn’t do anything about it,” he said.

“Then it got dramatically worse. I knew something was up when I couldn’t kick a ball, run or even walk. I bought myself a walking cane to get around the house because I was sick of using the walls!”

Over time Max changed from being cheerful and outgoing to unhappy. It took a year and a half to be diagnosed and, even then, Max needed to try a series of anti-inflammatory medicines before finding the answer with injections.

“I have never felt so great – sounds silly but I feel human again,” he said.

Max said the care provided by his rheumatology nurse has played a huge part in helping him deal with the condition.

“I was unhappy and I didn’t go through a good time for about three years and the nurses were there to help me. If I didn’t have them, the journey would have been a lot longer, more painful and frustrating and I would have felt like there was no support outside of my family. They’ve helped me get through it.”

Linda Bradbury, a rheumatology nurse with nearly 20 years’ experience and now working at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane, said she and her fellow nurses help to empower patients and enable them to manage better.

“Rheumatology nurses allow patients to have a better experience by providing quicker and ongoing access to information and care,” she said. “We play a critical role in education and support, helping patients to navigate their treatment plans, understand medications and make important decisions. Education is particularly important around diet and lifestyle choices that may have an impact on a patient’s condition,” said Ms Bradbury.

“Rheumatology nurses can also offer much needed psychological support, providing reassurance during times that can be stressful and overwhelming for patients and their families.”

The Arthritis Australia report, *Rheumatology nurses: Adding value to arthritis care*, was prepared by the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association. It states that early diagnosis and urgent access to specialists for treatment are critical for many inflammatory arthritic conditions to avoid or delay irreversible joint damage, deformity and disability.

Yet delays are common and access to rheumatologists is limited in many parts of Australia, especially in rural and remote areas, with lengthy waiting lists for appointments, said Ms Cahill.

“As it stands, this will only get worse in the future as a result of a growing shortage of rheumatologists and demographic trends. Greater use of rheumatology nurses in Australia can help to address these issues and support improved care and better outcomes for people living with severe and inflammatory forms of arthritis.”

This in turn would reduce the overall costs on the Australian health and welfare systems, she said.

“Adding rheumatology nursing to the traditional care model which uses only a rheumatologist would mean quicker access to specialist care and an earlier start to treatment. Our report shows this would in turn mean an increase in the number of patients going into remission and a decrease in the average cost of care per patient,” said Ms Cahill.

“For these reasons, we call on the Federal, State and Territory governments to provide dedicated funding to train and employ more rheumatology nurses,” finished Ms Cahill.

Background

Research and modelling for the report highlights that:

- There are only an estimated 50 rheumatology nurses, or 39 full time equivalent rheumatology nurses, practising in Australia to support the 1.7 million Australians with inflammatory arthritis.
- Only 23% of people with severe and inflammatory arthritis surveyed for the report had ever seen a rheumatology nurse as part of their care.
- Rheumatology nurses practise predominantly in outpatient clinics in the public hospital sector. However, around 80% of rheumatology practice takes place in the private sector, with the result that most people with inflammatory arthritis do not have access to rheumatology nursing care.
- People who had seen a rheumatology nurse as part of their care reported much higher rates of satisfaction across all aspects of their care than those who had not.

Benefits noted in the report in relation to having access to rheumatology nurse care include:

- better education and improved psychosocial support for patients;
- reduced delays in access to specialist care
- improved care coordination and continuity of care
- reduced health system costs in primary and secondary care
- improved patient outcomes
- much higher rates of patient satisfaction with care.

Economic modelling undertaken for the report compared costs and outcomes for the addition of rheumatology nursing to the traditional rheumatologist only model in an outpatient hospital clinic over a four-year period. The results demonstrate that adding a rheumatology nurse to the traditional rheumatologist only model would:

- Improve access to rheumatology specialist care and reduce delays in treatment. The number of patients able to be seen would increase by up to 47%. The proportion of patients seen within clinically relevant time frames would increase from 23% to 47.5% of patients
- Result in 31.6% of patients achieving remission at four years compared to 23.1% in the rheumatologist only clinic
- Decrease the average cost of treatment over four years from \$11,373 to \$10,483 per person. However, due to the increased number of patients treated, the total cost of providing this care would increase by 35.2% (\$6.549 million).

These estimates are conservative as additional benefits such as reduced future health service utilisation, reduced disability and welfare costs and increased economic participation were not able to be included in the analysis.

Actions recommended in the report to develop the rheumatology nurse workforce in Australia include:

- Define and recognise the rheumatology nurse role in collaborative team-based care for people with severe and inflammatory arthritis, including skills and competencies required for various levels of practice and education and training pathways

- Support models of care incorporating rheumatology nurses in public hospitals, including increased and dedicated funding for rheumatology nursing staff
- Support the development of models of care incorporating rheumatology nurses suitable for the private sector, and encourage implementation through the provision of case studies, the development of a business case and exploration of potential funding models.
- Support the introduction and optimisation of models of care utilising rheumatology nurse practitioners.

The report can be accessed at: www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

Case studies available upon request.

About Arthritis Australia

Arthritis Australia is the peak arthritis organisation in Australia and is supported by affiliate offices in the ACT, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia.

Arthritis Australia provides support and information to people with arthritis as well as their families and friends. The organisation promotes awareness of the challenges facing people with arthritis to the community and to leaders in business, industry, and government. In addition, Arthritis Australia funds research into potential causes and possible cures as well as better ways to live with arthritis.

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