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Arthritis sufferers excluded from everyday life

- **Many arthritis sufferers are so severely disabled they cannot engage in basic everyday activities**
- **One third of people with arthritis are unable to manage their home or garden**
- **One in four are permanently unable to work or study due to their condition**

Arthritis is the second leading cause of disability in Australia with many sufferers so severely disabled they cannot engage in basic everyday activities, new UNSW research has found.

The research, released on **World Arthritis Day (12 October)**, was conducted by UNSW's Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) for Arthritis Australia.

Arthritis is the most common cause of chronic pain in Australia and the most prevalent long-term health condition, affecting three million people of all ages or about 15 per cent of the population.

The nation-wide study examined the lived experience of 819 Australians with arthritis and related conditions.

Nearly all participants (95 per cent) reported arthritis limited their ability to manage daily activities with one third being unable to manage their home or garden, one in five unable to undertake domestic duties and five per cent requiring assistance with basic personal care, such as showering and dressing.

In particular, people's capacity to work was affected, with two in three people reporting that arthritis had affected the type and hours of work or study they were able to do and one in four reporting they were permanently unable to work or study due to their condition.

"This is a very significant finding when you consider that two in three people with arthritis are of working age," said Ms Ainslie Cahill, CEO of Arthritis Australia.

As a result, social exclusion is often compounded by financial hardship due to reduced income and the added costs associated with living with arthritis. One in five participants reported struggling to meet their day to day expenses with many reporting they had to go without or delay health care visits or compromise on other basics such as food to meet the high costs of medication.

"We are also concerned about the finding that two in three study participants experienced delays of more than one year to diagnosis and one in three experienced delays of more than five years," Ms Cahill said.

"We know that early diagnosis and treatment is critical, especially for conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, where it has been shown to reduce associated disability by a third."

Arthritis Australia is calling on the federal government to implement the recently launched *Time to Move: Arthritis* strategy, which provides a comprehensive range of proposals to reduce the disabling impact of arthritis by improving care and support for people with the condition.

“We know that much can be done to prevent or reduce the disability associated with arthritis by providing better care for people as early as possible in the disease course,” Ms Cahill said. “This helps to keep people with arthritis in work and living life to the full – this is what *Time to Move* is aiming to address.”

Other key findings of the SPRC research:

- The disabling impact of arthritis varies, but is significant. Most people with arthritis report their condition limits their ability to engage in daily activities, with 37 per cent reporting that they were always limited and 54 per cent reporting that they were sometimes limited in their ability to engage in daily activities due to their condition.
- Two-thirds of participants said they suffered financially because of their arthritis; 16 per cent reported that they struggled to meet their expenses due to the financial impact of their arthritis, while five per cent reported that they were much worse off and needed financial support.
- People with arthritis-related disability may require short-term, long-term or permanent access to formal support, including both services and financial support. Responses need to be flexible to suit individual needs and circumstances and accommodate changes as the disease fluctuates or progresses over time.
- Access to financial support, appropriate health care and formal care appears to reduce the barriers experienced by people with arthritis in their ability to engage in daily life activities.
- Many people with arthritis are unaware of support services available, or discover them by chance, or have trouble accessing them because of limited recognition of the disabling nature of their condition.

SPRC chief investigator, UNSW’s Rosemary Kayess, says the report indicates that people with arthritis could benefit from the National Disability Insurance Scheme reforms.

“It’s important in this changing policy context that we understand what the disabling effects of arthritis are and what supports are required to keep people actively participating in society.”

Media contact: Fran Strachan, UNSW Media Office, fran.strachan@unsw.edu.au, 9385 8732, 0429 416 070

A full copy of the report is available on request

Interviews: Franca Marine, National Policy and Government Relations Manager, Arthritis Australia. Mobile: 0432 567 413

Case study: Wendy Favorito is 43 years old and has rheumatoid arthritis. She was first diagnosed at the age of six years.