



Media Release: Strictly embargoed until Thursday March 21, 2019.

A new pathway for Arthritis:

Arthritis Australia launches National Strategic Action Plan

- *The Action Plan outlines key priorities for **preventing arthritis, investing in research and improving treatment and support** for people living with the condition.*
- *Four million Australians currently live with arthritis. It is the leading cause of chronic pain and there is no cure.*
- *Annual healthcare costs for arthritis have been estimated to exceed \$5.5 billion.*
- *Arthritis Australia calls on government at all levels to invest in implementing the Action Plan to transform future outcomes and quality of life for people living with the pain of arthritis.*
- *Key recommendations include funding Arthritis Educators to provide individualised care and support, improving access to appropriate treatment and care, and ambitious investment in research.*

Thursday March 21, 2019. Arthritis Australia is calling on government at all levels to invest in implementing the National Strategic Action Plan for Arthritis (the Action Plan) which was launched today. The Action Plan provides an evidence-based blueprint to guide national efforts to improve health and quality of life for people living with arthritis, reduce the cost and prevalence of the condition, and reduce the impact on individuals, their carers and the community.

Development of the Action Plan was led by Arthritis Australia for the Australian Government Department of Health, with input from consumer and medical groups across Australia.

Chair of Arthritis Australia, Kristine Riethmiller, says “Implementation of the Action Plan will go a long way towards ensuring people with arthritis get the right treatment, care and support they need to live well with their condition.”

“However, significant upfront and ongoing investment to implement the actions set out within this plan is absolutely essential if we are to make any progress in our fight against this debilitating and costly disease.”

“Arthritis currently affects four million Australians and that figure is projected to steadily rise. To date, arthritis has been poorly managed in Australia, with significant amounts of money thrown at unnecessary, ineffective and even harmful treatment options. This Action Plan illustrates the pathway to implement high quality policies, programs and services to prevent arthritis, and deliver high-value care to improve health and quality of life.”

26 year old Christina Maurice was diagnosed with non-radiographic axial spondyloarthritis at age 22.

“After living in pain and dealing with fatigue since I was a teenager, it was a relief when I finally received a diagnosis. This relief was also mixed with confusion as I had always understood arthritis to be an older person’s disease. At times it has been very challenging to find the right support and

information. While I have an amazing rheumatologist who has provided me with holistic care and normalised my experience of the disease, I know others that haven't been as fortunate and have had difficulty accessing the same care."

"Living with arthritis is hard because it is an internal and silent disease - no one understands what you're going through or how simple tasks can be difficult, particularly if you're a young person. I still find it hard to explain why I don't have the same energy levels as everyone else. I would love for there to be more awareness about the different forms and stages of arthritis, support services and greater knowledge to promote early intervention."

Priority Areas and Key Recommendations

The Action Plan identifies **three key priority areas** which require urgent, immediate attention in order to reduce the health burden of arthritis both now and into the future.

1. **Awareness, prevention and education** - arthritis is often incorrectly thought of as a single condition that affects only old people. Misconceptions can undermine prevention, early diagnosis and effective management.ⁱ In addition, few people with arthritis receive the information and support they need to help them to manage their condition.
2. **High-value, person-centred care and support** – currently two-thirds of Australians with arthritis report that they are faring badly with their conditionⁱⁱ, with the most common problems being inadequate pain management, lack of information and support, and the high costs of care.
3. **Research evidence and data** - Investment is required across all areas of research from basic through to clinical research, epidemiological, translational and implementation research.

Recommended actions in the plan include:

- Conduct **awareness campaigns** to increase public understanding of arthritis and how it can be prevented and managed.
- Fund **arthritis educators** to provide personalised care and support for children and adults diagnosed with arthritis.
- Develop and implement a national **sports injury prevention program** to reduce the risk of developing osteoarthritis.
- Increase funding for **specialist and allied health services** so people with arthritis can receive timely, appropriate and affordable care.
- Provide information, **education and tools for health professionals** to help them to deliver best-practice arthritis care.
- Pilot and evaluate a **community-based 'one-stop-shop' arthritis clinic** to provide a single point of contact for diagnosis, assessment, triage, treatment and referral to other services.
- Fund an ambitious 'arthritis and musculoskeletal research mission' from the Medical Research Future Fund to improve arthritis prevention, diagnosis and treatment, and **support the search for cures**.

CEO of Arthritis Australia, Andrew Mills, sees Arthritis Educators as a vital component of the Action Plan, with individualised help and support sorely lacking from the existing system.

"A diagnosis of arthritis can have a profound effect on a person's life, including impacting their ability to work and their overall wellbeing," explains Mr Mills. "In the current system, a person may get half an hour with a specialist to talk about their diagnosis, and then they're often left to their own devices. An Arthritis Educator could step in at this point and provide more detailed information about the patient's condition, information about medications and side effects, emotional support, and also help them to navigate their way through the various medical and allied health services available."

Medical Director of Arthritis Australia, Prof Susanna Proudman, says ambitious investment in research and improving access to appropriate treatment and services is also critical.

“There’s no cure for arthritis, but there are some effective treatments to help ease symptoms, and with prompt treatment, we can achieve remission (in some forms of arthritis), and slow or even halt disease progression,” says Prof Proudman. “Unfortunately, it can take some people up to a year to see a specialist through the public system. Ideally, people with certain types of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis or juvenile arthritis, should see a specialist within 12 weeks of the onset of symptoms – a year is far too long to wait, and the disease can progress significantly in that time.”

“This Action Plan shows how Australia can develop better care and support services, resulting in better health outcomes for Australians with arthritis. Ambitious and forward-looking investment in research from the Medical Research Future Fund is also critical to help find better ways to treat and, ultimately to cure, arthritis in its many forms,” she concludes.

MEDIA ASSETS: The Action Plan and media assets available [here](#), including infographic and quotes from people living with Arthritis.

Media case studies available upon request.

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Notes for Editors

Key Arthritis Stats and Facts

- Arthritis is an umbrella term for more than 100 conditions affecting the joints and surrounding structures
- Arthritis is one of the most common, costly and disabling chronic conditions in Australia.
- Four million Australians of all ages are affected by some form of arthritis, including 6,000 children
- Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis, affecting two million Australians
- Rheumatoid arthritis, an auto-immune condition, is the second most common form of arthritis, affecting nearly 500,000 Australians
- Arthritis costs the health system more than \$5.5 billion a yearⁱⁱⁱ
- Arthritis is the leading cause of chronic pain in Australia^{iv}
- Arthritis is the second most common cause of disability after back pain.^v
- Arthritis has a major impact on a person’s capacity to work and is the second most common reason for early retirement due to ill health.^{vi} In 2015, it cost over \$1.1 billion a year in extra welfare payments and lost taxation revenue, as well as \$7.2 billion in lost GDP.^{vii} Arthritis also accounts for nearly half (40%) of the loss in full-time employment and 42% of the loss in part-time employment due to chronic disease.^{viii}
- One in four people with arthritis experiences mental health issues.^{ix} People with mental health conditions are also around 50% more likely to have arthritis than the general population.^x
- By 2030, the number of people with arthritis is projected to rise to 5.4 million and the associated health system cost to \$7.6 billion.

Acknowledgement

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- Action Plan Steering Committee including representatives from:
 - Consumers, Arthritis Australia; State-based arthritis consumer organisations; Consumers Health Forum
 - Australian Medical Association; Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
 - Australian Rheumatology Association; Rheumatology Health Professionals Association
 - Australian Orthopaedic Association
 - Australian Physiotherapy Association
 - Australasian College of Sport and Exercise Physicians
 - Pharmacy Guild of Australia
 - PainAustralia
 - Private Healthcare Australia
 - Primary Health Networks
 - Australian Government Department of Health; State Health Departments
 - Australia and New Zealand Musculoskeletal Clinical Trials Group
 - Curtin University
- Project Team for the *National Osteoarthritis Strategy*
- Participants in the Arthritis Roundtable held in December 2017
- Members of the National Arthritis Consumer Reference Group.

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.

www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

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ⁱ Egerton T, Diamond L, Buchbinder R et al 2017. A systematic review and evidence synthesis of qualitative studies to identify primary care clinicians' barriers and enablers to the management of osteoarthritis. *Osteoarthritis and Cartilage* 2017 May;25(5):625-638

ⁱⁱ Arthritis Australia, 2011. *The Ignored Majority: The Voice of Arthritis 2011*

ⁱⁱⁱ Ackerman IN, Bohensky MA, Pratt C, Gorelik A, Liew D, 2016. *Counting the Cost: the current and future burden of arthritis. Part 1 Healthcare Costs*. Arthritis Australia 2016.

^{iv} Henderson JV1, Harrison CM, Britt HC, Bayram CF, Miller GC 2013. Prevalence, causes, severity, impact, and management of chronic pain in Australian general practice patients. *Pain Med*. 2013 Sep;14(9):1346-61. doi: 10.1111/pme.12195.

^v Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016. 4430.0 - *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia, Summary of Findings 2015*

^{vi} Deborah J Schofield, Rupendra N Shrestha, Michelle Cunich et al 2015. Lost productive life years caused by chronic conditions in Australians aged 45–64 years, 2010–2030 *Med J Aust* 2015; 203 (6): 260.

^{vii} Schofield DJ, Shrestha RN, Cunich M 2016. *Counting the cost: the current and future burden of arthritis. Part 2 Economic Costs*. Arthritis Australia 2016.

^{viii} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009. *Chronic disease and participation in work*. Cat. No. PHE 109. Canberra: AIHW

^{ix} <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/arthritis-musculoskeletal-conditions/arthritis-snapshot/contents/impact-of-arthritis>

^x Harris, B, Duggan, M, Batterham, P, Bartlem, K, Clinton-McHarg, T, Dunbar, J, Fehily, C, Lawrence, D, Morgan, M & Rosenbaum, S. 2018. *Australia's Mental and Physical Health Tracker: Background Paper*, Australian Health Policy Collaboration issues paper no. 2018-02, Melbourne, AHPC