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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.

- ENDS -

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*