

Respite for palliative caregivers

In Australia, palliative care is primarily provided by family members. However, it has been shown that the strain of providing high need care places a significant burden on caregivers which often results in patients being hospitalised.

CUCRH has conducted two studies of a novel respite service for palliative caregivers have shown that it significantly reduces patient time spent in hospital.

Senior Research Officer Melissa Barrett conducted research which tested a home palliative care respite service offered by Enrolled Nurses (EN). The project was piloted in Geraldton through Silver Chain, the organisation responsible for palliative care services at that time. All patients and carers were screened regularly and those whose scores indicated that care was becoming stressful were offered limited hours of respite care.

The pilot found that carers and patients were very satisfied with the service. Compared to historical controls matched for age, gender and severity, patients receiving respite care had significantly lower rates of hospitalization prior to death.

Following positive results the service was continued in Geraldton and introduced in Albany, another Western Australian regional centre of similar size to Geraldton. A third centre, Busselton, was used as a control site.

The study found patients receiving respite care spent 65 to 80% less time in hospital compared with Busselton patients and with historical controls drawn from the same location.

If the program was implemented throughout non-metropolitan areas there would be an annual direct saving of \$1.08 million. Although this study specifically considers the provision of palliative respite care the results may have applications for other health issues such as chronic disease management which can profitably be delivered at home by skilled health workers.

This research has been presented five conferences and is the subject of a paper which is undergoing peer review. Both intervention sites are continuing the service and, as a result of the studies, a representative of WA Health Department has written a Cabinet Submission to fund the Palliative Care Rural Model Care throughout rural WA and is awaiting confirmation of this funding.

Funding for the pilot came from the Australian Department of Health and Ageing Primary Health Care Research and Evaluation Development strategy administered through CUCRH. Funding for the study in three sites was from WA Health Department Strategic Research Advisory Council Research Translation grants.

In addition to Melissa Barrett, the project team has included Ann Larson and Belynda Wheatland from CUCRH, A/Prof Lynn Oldham from WA Centre for Cancer and Palliative Care; Helen Walker from WA Cancer and Palliative Care Network, Dr David Whyatt from University of Western Australia, Prof Linda Kristjanson from Curtin University of Technology, and Pam Hasleby, Lesley Forrester and Liz Bickley from Western Australian Country Health Services.