Palliative Care & Chronic Heart Failure

Position Statement

**Palliative Care Australia** is the national peak body established by the collective membership of eight state and territory palliative care organisations and the Australia and New Zealand Society of Palliative Medicine. Together the Palliative Care Australia members network to foster, influence and promote local and national endeavours to realise the vision of quality care for all at the end of life.

The Heart Foundation’s purpose is to reduce premature death and suffering from heart, stroke and blood vessel disease. As a charity, the Heart Foundation relies on donations and gifts to continue its lifesaving research and health education work.

**PCA & the Heart Foundation believe**

- Palliative care should be available to all people diagnosed with a life limiting condition, including chronic heart conditions.
- Palliative care can improve the quality of life for the person with chronic heart failure, their family and carer/s.
- Palliative care is best delivered comprehensively, through an effective, interdisciplinary team of health professionals.
- Health professionals should seek to provide excellent advice and information to the person, their family and carer/s in order to ensure informed decision making.
- Care should be person-centred to enable a focus on the individual’s unique perceptions of what constitutes quality of life. The person, their family and carer/s are entitled to make informed decisions regarding treatment pathways.
- Advance care planning helps to ensure that the person, their family and carer/s are well supported in the decision making processes.
- Ongoing, open, direct and compassionate discussions can ease fears about pain, loss of dignity, abandonment and the unknown. Discussions about end of life issues should be frequently revisited.

**PCA & the Heart Foundation call for**

- Improved access to palliative care services for people with chronic heart failure.
- Increased awareness amongst health professionals and the community of the potential benefits of palliative care for someone with chronic heart disease.
- Increased education and awareness amongst cardiologists about the benefits of palliative care for people with chronic heart failure.
- Early identification and timely referrals to palliative care services.
- A collaborative approach between the team of health care professionals, the person with chronic heart failure, the family and carer/s.
- Better access to palliative care services for remote, rural and regional patients.
- Better access to palliative care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Background**

1 A supportive approach that aspires to improve the quality of life of a person and their families facing a terminal illness, in accordance to the person’s wishes and through the prevention and relief of suffering by early identification and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual. (World Health Organisation)

2 Heart foundation www.heartonline.org.au
The number of people with chronic heart failure is rising. There is no cure and more than half of people diagnosed with chronic heart failure will die within five years.³ The Australian Bureau of Statistics lists Ischaemic heart diseases as the leading cause of death in Australia in 2011, with heart failure ranked as the 9th leading cause.⁴

The provision of comprehensive palliative care services is necessary in achieving the best quality of life for people with chronic heart failure, their family and carer/s.

Often people with chronic heart failure suffer from symptoms that are otherwise treatable through palliative care services. People with end stage heart failure can experience many symptoms including, but not limited to: pain, breathlessness, fatigue, cachexia, loss of appetite, anxiety, depression, constipation, nausea and sleep difficulties.⁵ It is also not uncommon for people with chronic heart failure to be suffering from other comorbidities as well as these symptoms. Palliative care can be used in conjunction with other treatments, including curative, that target the person’s ongoing condition(s).

Through prevention and relief of suffering, palliative care services aim to improve the quality of life of people and their families facing the challenges associated with life limiting conditions, such as chronic heart failure.⁶ Palliative care services can help achieve a greater level of comfort and a better quality of life by providing appropriate and individualised support for each person’s physical, emotional, psychosocial, cultural and spiritual wellbeing.

Effective palliative care requires a workforce that collaborates confidently and capably in the management of these elements.

Palliative Care Australia supports discussions about advance care planning to provide a healthcare framework for health professionals, the patient, their family and carers throughout the unpredictable trajectory of chronic heart failure.

By raising awareness and support across the community, patients, their families and carers will be able to make informed decisions on their future care, while being aware and having access to relevant support networks.

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³ Davidson, Patricia M. "End stage heart failure patients: Palliative Care in General Practice" Australian Family Physician December 2010 39:12 pp. 916-920
⁵ Heart foundation www.heartonline.org.au
⁶ Ibid.