

# Position Statement

## Palliative Care and Chronic Heart Failure



October 2015

This is a joint position statement from Palliative Care Australia (PCA) and the Heart Foundation.

**Palliative Care Australia** (PCA) is the national peak body for palliative care in Australia. PCA provides leadership on palliative care policy and community engagement. Working closely with consumers, its Member Organisations and the palliative care and broader health workforce, PCA aims to improve the quality of life and death for people with a life-limiting illness, their families and carers.

**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 and 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 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 perception of what forms 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 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 and the Heart Foundation call for:

- Improved access to palliative care for people with chronic heart failure.
- Increased awareness among health professionals and the community of the potential benefits of palliative care for a person with chronic heart disease.
- Increased education and awareness among 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, family and carer/s.
- Improved access to palliative care for people living in regional, rural and remote areas.
- Improved access to palliative care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## Background:

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 ninth leading cause.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, Patricia M. "End stage heart failure patients: Palliative Care in General Practice" *Australian Family Physician* December 2010 39:12 pp. 916-920

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 3303.0 *Causes of Death*, Australia, 2011, released 15 March 2013. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3303.0Chapter42011> accessed 10 October 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Heart foundation [www.heartonline.org.au](http://www.heartonline.org.au)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.