

MEDIA RELEASE



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Connect with Palliative Care Australia

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New report highlights unmet palliative care need and inequity across the Western Pacific region

Only 1 in 10 people who need palliative care are currently receiving it, according to a new report released today by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Worldwide Palliative Care Alliance (WPCA). The *Global Atlas of Palliative Care at the End of Life* is the first document to map the need for, and availability of, palliative care globally, and it presents some stark realities for the Western Pacific region.

It is estimated that every year over 20 million patients need palliative care at the end of life. This rises to at least 40 million if those that could benefit from palliative care at an earlier stage of their diagnosis are included and if family members are also taken into consideration, the actual need could double or triple.

‘The Atlas also shows that the West Pacific Region has the highest distribution of adults needing palliative care compared to all other WHO regions (29%),’ said Dr Yvonne Luxford, Chief Executive Officer of Palliative Care Australia (PCA). ‘We also have the second highest rate of adults needing palliative care – 378 out of every 100,000 require access to services.’

‘Particularly relevant for Australia is the fact that 69% of people who require palliative care are over 60 years old. This demand is only going to grow as our population ages, and is further evidence for the need to improve palliative and end of life care services in aged care – something PCA has highlighted for a number of years.’

Dr Oleg Chestnov is the WHO Assistant Director-General for Non-communicable Diseases and Mental Health. He says that approximately one third of those needing palliative care suffer from cancer, but the greatest need is for those with progressive chronic illnesses.

‘The *Atlas* shows that the great majority of the global need of end of life care is associated with non-communicable diseases such as cancer, heart disease, stroke and lung diseases. While we strengthen efforts to reduce the burden of the biggest killers in the world today, we must also alleviate the suffering of those with progressive illness who do not respond to curative treatment.’

‘The Western Pacific region actually has the highest percentage of adults (41.5%) and children (14%) in need of palliative care for a cancer diagnosis,’ added Dr Luxford. ‘However, in Australia we know that we have a disproportionately high level of access to palliative care for those with cancer and it is vital that we are supporting people with a variety of diseases, such as heart disease and dementia.’

The *Atlas* calls on all countries to include palliative care as an essential component to every modern healthcare system. This means addressing barriers such as:

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PCA is the peak national organisation representing the interests and aspirations of all who share the ideal of quality care at the end of life

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- lack of policies recognising palliative care and the need for care both at the end of life and during progressive illnesses
- lack of resources to implement services, including access to essential medicines, especially pain relievers
- lack of education for health care professionals and members of the public about the benefits of palliative care.

‘Thinking about the areas we can make the biggest improvement from an Australian point of view, the need to make palliative care a compulsory part of all health professional education and training across their career span, stands out for me,’ said Dr Luxford. ‘Without supporting the specialist and generalist workforce to provide palliative care across all settings, the needs of dying Australians will continue to go unmet. The development of a Palliative Care Workforce Strategy should be a priority.’

‘What I also think we need to look at is the social reluctance to talk about death and dying. The *Atlas* identifies this as a major barrier to accessing palliative care services, and we know that Australians just aren’t comfortable talking about end of life issues. We also have a large percentage of our population born overseas, some from countries in our region that have very limited knowledge about palliative care, so we also need to look at strategies to ensure everyone in our community has access to the information they need.’

The publication of the *Atlas* follows last week’s meeting of the Executive Board of the World Health Assembly which called on Member States to strengthen palliative care as a component of integrated treatment throughout the life course and recommended that the 67th World Health Assembly adopts a resolution on the subject in May 2014.

‘The Australian Government was one of the co-sponsors of the WHA resolution, which is great to see,’ said Dr Luxford. ‘We will be calling for all members to adopt the resolution at the full WHA meeting in May.’

‘The evidence is clear: palliative care makes a huge difference to the quality of life of those living with life limiting illnesses and services can be implemented at low cost, actually saving health budgets money,’ said Dr Luxford. ‘The *Atlas* gives us the data needed to position palliative care higher on national agendas and we look forward to Government support to implement the recommendations from the resolution and improve quality care at the end of life for all Australians.’

Ends

Interviews available with PCA, WHO and WPCA representatives. For more information please contact: Claire Maskell Gibson: 02 9239 2906 / 0406 258 722 or claire@palliativecare.org.au

The *Atlas* can be downloaded from <http://www.thewpca.org/resources/global-atlas-of-palliative-care/>

Notes to Editors

WHO is the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system. It is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends. For more information on WHO go to www.who.int

The Worldwide Palliative Care Alliance (WPCA) is a global action network focusing exclusively on hospice and palliative care development worldwide. Its members are national and regional hospice and palliative care organisations and affiliate organisations supporting hospice and palliative care. The WPCA is in official relations with the World Health Organization and this publication is one product of that relationship. WPCA is the international arm for www.ehospice.com, an international palliative care news and information service, and is the home for World Hospice and Palliative Care Day www.worldday.org. For more information on the WPCA go to www.thewpca.org

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