

Access to supports for regional, rural and remote communities

Australians living in regional, rural and remote communities are more likely to have restricted access to healthcare services and other supports, which are crucial to maintaining a good quality of life for people living with dementia, their families and carers.

Restricted access to supports and services can have numerous impacts to people with dementia, their families and carers, including: delayed diagnosis, poorer access to information regarding dementia, and limited access to a range of quality dementia supports and services. In particular, people living with dementia often report challenges accessing medical care, allied health services, personal care, palliative care and accommodation services – such as respite and appropriate residential care.

Crucially, people with dementia, their families and carers report that timely access to quality care is critical to their wellbeing, physical and mental health and quality of life.

Dementia Australia is advocating for improvements to government policy and resources to ensure quality of care and access to services and supports for individuals with dementia living in regional, rural and remote communities. We call on Governments to respond to the unique challenges faced by people living in these areas and ensure their needs are met within the local community.

Issue

People living in regional, rural and remote areas deserve to have equitable access to services and be supported to remain living in these areas throughout their experience with dementia. Living with dementia brings challenges for all people with a diagnosis and those who care for them. These challenges are compounded if a person lives in regional, rural and remote areas due to geographic isolation, travel distances, and limited services and resources. 'Ageing in place' for people with dementia in regional, rural, and especially remote, areas is an admirable, but not always achievable, goal because of these factors.

The key concerns and challenges for people with dementia, carers and service providers in regional, rural and remote Australia include:

- assessment, diagnosis and management of dementia
- education and awareness of dementia
- opportunities for social engagement and community participation for people with dementia and carers
- access to community, respite and residential aged care
- access to specialist support services
- limited choice of providers
- cost of transport for specialist services
- availability of culturally appropriate services and supports
- workforce issues for community, respite and residential aged care services.

“I find that carers stop looking for services. So many barriers are put up in trying to access any community service that people often throw their hands in the air and say it is all too hard and do without. They and the person with dementia become more isolated.” Carer

A lack of adequate transport and long travel times to access specialist dementia supports and services, such as respite, is a key issue for people with dementia, their families and carers living in regional, rural and remote areas. Without mobility, quality of life can be affected, and the distance to access quality care can delay diagnosis and impact early management of dementia. Access to support services, for example day respite, is inequitable as staff travel time is factored into care plans, reducing face-to-face contact and often family may need to drive the person with dementia a long distance to day services in urban centres, reducing the benefits of respite for the carer.

Additionally, there are many communities that do not have appropriately trained health professionals and services to meet their care needs within the local area, making long distance travel unavoidable to access quality care. A major issue is lack of choice. There is often only one provider – and in small remote communities, it can be the one provider who delivers all disability and aged services, eliminating choice for people with dementia, their families and carers.

“In remote areas there isn’t much support.” Person living with dementia

What is the point of accessing services that don’t know what they’re going to provide for you anyway? For you essentially have to train the provider.” Person living with dementia

The flow on effects of a reduced ability to access trained health professionals and services is that people are not receiving a timely diagnosis, missing out on vital support services, and losing a sense of control and independence. Coupled with stigma associated with dementia, people are afraid of seeking a diagnosis, which further compromises access to these vital support services.

Dementia adds another layer of complexity in caring for people. When individuals with dementia also experience other barriers to care, such as their location, ethnicity, sexuality or socio-economic status, access to quality care becomes exponentially more difficult. As an example, the availability of dementia care is difficult for those living in rural and remote areas due to their geographical isolation, a shortage of health care providers and patchier access to health services, as well as socioeconomic disadvantage, which limits their ability to access specific specialist services. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, there are very few care options in regional, rural and remote communities and services. While being more culturally appropriate, community workers may lack the knowledge to tailor supports to meet the needs of people living with dementia. For example, dementia is not necessarily identified or understood as a medical condition in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and pre-existing care options are often away from country and in institutional settings that may not be culturally appropriate. Additionally, dementia is competing for space with multiple health issues and is not always seen as a priority.

Although there is an increasing policy and program appetite to try internet-based technology solutions in regional areas, their uptake is hampered by poor connectivity in some areas as well as the inappropriateness of some aspects of technology for people living with dementia with more advanced cognitive impairment. Having access to support people and/or advocates who can provide assistance in getting the most out of technology is essential.

**“Telehealth is only useful if people live in an internet supported area.”
Person living with dementia**

Dementia Australia’s position

Governments, regional health professionals and service providers need to be prepared to respond to the growing number of people with dementia living in regional, rural and remote areas. They need to work collaboratively with Primary Health Networks (PHNs), the aged care sector, local health services and people who are impacted by dementia to understand the key issues facing people with dementia in regional, rural and remote areas. PHNs then need to develop and implement consistent dementia plans to improve services and supports across regional, rural and remote communities.

Specifically these plans should include reference to:

- Funding workforce development and training for GPs and allied health professionals working in rural and remote locations, specialising in all forms of dementia and dementia care. This needs to include incentives for attraction and retention of qualified professionals and support.
- Developing entry-level workforce training to increase workforce capacity and support in regional, rural and remote communities who can help people with getting a diagnosis and early post-diagnosis connect with social supports/programs and identify services and useful information in the local community.

- Working with internet providers and tech companies to explore the most effective telehealth technology to support people living with dementia and their carers living in regional, rural and remote communities. This is particularly important at the point of diagnosis to improve access to culturally relevant information and support services (e.g. online communication help sheets such as 'how to use technology effectively' and 'how to make your internet connection more stable' to support people to use the technology effectively).
- Working with the transport sector in each state and territory to ensure adequate transport is available for people with dementia and their carers to remain living in the community. This is to support them in accessing local health services and supports to remain socially connected and meaningfully engaged.
- Working with Dementia Australia through initiatives like Dementia Friendly Communities to build community awareness and understanding of dementia (types of behaviours and symptoms) to enable support and understanding, and reduce stigma.
- Developing a support program with trained care workers to facilitate enablement at the point of diagnosis. This is to include promotion of referral pathways and relevant information to access local support services within the community.
- Exploring options to make funding and service delivery more flexible for people living with dementia, their carers and families in regional, rural and remote communities. As there is currently a lack of specialist services and skilled workers, people living with dementia in these areas require greater flexibility with their care packages.