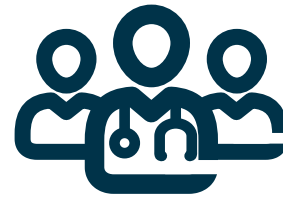


## Access to Allied Health services for people living with dementia



### Summary



Every person diagnosed with dementia will **experience the condition**, and changes in capacities and abilities, **differently**



Every person living with dementia will therefore have **unique physical and psychological needs** which will change over time



Research indicates that the **use of allied health services** can slow the progression of cognitive and functional decline, improve quality of life and delay or prevent admission to residential aged care



An individually tailored approach to allied health service provision, with an emphasis on wellness and enablement, is important in supporting **people with dementia to live active and fulfilling lives**



Timely referral and access to **allied health services is an integral part** of the supportive management and care pathway and must be made available to every Australian living with dementia

## Background

Close to half a million people currently live with dementia in Australia. The most common forms of dementia are characterised by typical features and symptoms, but every person will experience the condition and associated physical and cognitive changes in a unique way. Each person will need access to a range of different support services, including allied health services, to respond to these changing needs.

Allied health is a broad designation that encompasses a range of services that can include but is not limited to occupational therapy, physiotherapy, dietetics, podiatry, dentistry, music therapy, cognitive therapy, psychology, audiology, chiropractic, exercise physiology, optometry and speech therapy. Allied health professionals assess physical and cognitive issues and provide interventions to support the maintenance of current strengths and capacities, improve skill acquisition and promote recovery, enablement and rehabilitation.

An enablement approach aims to support and encourage individuals living with dementia to act as independently for as long as possible. The approach focuses on maintaining current strengths and abilities and participating in meaningful activities and can reduce feelings of helplessness and dependency.

## Issue

People living with dementia experience multiple forms of disability and clearly benefit from the provision of allied health services. Research has identified that allied health services and enablement approaches are not routinely offered to people living with dementia.<sup>i</sup> Structural inequities in the health care system impose additional barriers to allied health service access for people with dementia. The recent Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety recommended significant improvements in access given the important contribution these services make in maintaining quality of life and independence.<sup>ii</sup>

Understanding of the complexity and variability of the dementia trajectory and associated physical and psychosocial needs is poor within the broader health care system, including primary health practice. In the community and residential aged care sector, there remains a widespread assumption that because people with dementia experience a progressive decline rather than having a disease trajectory with an obvious restorative path, they are not suitable candidates for allied health services supporting wellness and enablement approaches.

**“ We are people with our own co-morbidities; when we come into dementia, we don’t just have problems with dementia, we have problems with everything else in life and Allied Health is important for both of these. ”**

- Person living with dementia

People diagnosed with dementia are not made aware of the benefits and/or offered access to allied health services by their GPs, specialists and other health professionals. If referrals to allied health services are made, service co-ordination and access is often inconsistent and inadequate.

The limited availability of allied health services is particularly pronounced for individuals living in rural, regional and remote areas. Linguistic, cultural and other differences also present barriers for people from diverse backgrounds, and those who support them, when seeking information about and access to allied health services.

Even when access to allied health services is available, studies have shown the services provided tend to focus on managing impairments rather than an enabling approach to enhancing, restoring or maintaining an individual’s functional capacity and independence<sup>iii</sup> Effective enabling interventions are dependent on allied health professionals with the appropriate knowledge, skills and/or experience in working with people with dementia.

## Dementia Australia's position



People living with dementia believe that allied health services are critical for their physical and psychological well-being and that they have the right to access allied health services in a timely manner commensurate with other health care service consumers.



There is a clear evidence-base demonstrating the benefits of a range of allied health services for people living with dementia. In adopting an enablement and wellness approach, allied health services can focus on maintaining current strengths and abilities, provide rehabilitative support following acute health events, compensate for declining function and promote well-being and independence.



In the absence of pharmacological or other disease-modifying treatments for dementia, Dementia Australia believes that facilitating a wellness and enablement approach through the provision of allied health services plays a key role in ensuring that people can live well as possible with dementia over the trajectory of the condition.



Dementia Australia strongly recommends that information and access to allied health services should be offered and facilitated immediately post-diagnosis as an integral part of the dementia support and care planning pathway. The services should be coordinated, tailored to the individual and integrated into routine, person-centred care across all health care sectors.

i-Laver, K.E., Crotty, M., Low, L.F. et al. (2020). Rehabilitation for people with dementia: a multi-method study examining knowledge and attitudes. *BMC Geriatrics*, 20, 531

ii-Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, 2019

iii-Poulos, J. et al (2017) A comprehensive approach to reablement in dementia, *Alzheimer's Dementia (NY)* 3(3): 450-458