

Access to care services and supports for regional, rural and remote communities



Summary



Individuals living with dementia in regional, rural and remote communities experience socioeconomic and health inequalities that limit their access to services and supports.



Inequitable access to services and supports can have significant psychosocial and health consequences for people living with dementia, their families and carers.



Accurate planning, resourcing, and costing for service providers in these areas could improve access issues.



Dementia Australia supports the recommendations outlined in the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety to improve the quality and accessibility of aged care services in regional, rural, and remote communities.

Background

Australians living in regional, rural and remote communities experience more barriers accessing healthcare services compared with Australians living in major cities.ⁱ Individuals of all ages living with dementia, their family members and carers often report challenges accessing medical care; allied health services; personal, dementia and palliative care; and accommodation services (respite and residential care). Inadequate resources and care options in regional, rural and remote communities exacerbate these challenges.ⁱⁱ Without access to appropriate supports that meet their needs, individuals living with dementia, their family members and their carers are at greater risk of delayed diagnosis, diminished quality of life, declining function, unnecessary hospitalisation, carer burnout and premature entry to residential aged care

Issue

Older adults make up a greater proportion of the population in regional, rural and remote communities compared with major cities, but access to aged care services does not match this higher demographic demand.ⁱⁱⁱ On average, people living in regional, rural and remote communities tend to experience higher rates of chronic illness and socioeconomic disadvantage, factors that can contribute to the increased need for support in older age.^{iv} There are 83 people with dementia per 1,000 Australians aged 65 and over and approximately 1.4 million people over the age of 65 living in regional, rural and remote Australia.^v

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

The issue of access to supports and services for individuals living with younger onset dementia is an equally longstanding issue. Younger people living in rural or remote regions are likely to be increasingly disadvantaged given appropriate services may be limited or non-existent.^{vi}

One in five (22%) older people living in very remote areas were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, compared with only 0.5% in major cities.^{vii} Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience dementia at a rate 3 to 5 times higher than the general population and they are also more likely to develop dementia at a younger age.^{viii} Despite this, there are few culturally appropriate dementia care options and services available in regional, rural and remote areas for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.^{ix}

Individuals with dementia, their families and carers living in regional, rural and remote communities experience limited access to services and supports as a result of:

- geographic isolation
- increased travel distances
- fewer options for services and resources
- higher costs to access and provide services
- difficulties recruiting and retaining service providers
- limited access to information and education about dementia
- lack of culturally appropriate services and supports

“ 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 Australian government’s projections of demand for aged care in regional, rural and remote communities are population-based rather than needs-based and there is no targeted strategy for providing aged care in remote and very remote areas.^x The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed additional impacts on health care services and supports, including dementia care, in regional, rural and remote communities. COVID-19 can be more severe for people living with chronic and progressive conditions including dementia. This, coupled with increased levels of isolation, makes those living with dementia in regional, rural and remote communities particularly vulnerable to health inequalities.^{xi}

“ 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

Dementia Australia's position



People living with dementia in regional, rural and remote communities are entitled to access care services and supports in a timely manner. Dementia Australia endorses the recommendations outlined in the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety for improving the accessibility and quality of aged care in regional, rural and remote communities.^{xii} This will require improvements in government policy to ensure the provision of quality health care, including dementia care, and equitable access to other services and supports for individuals living in these communities.



Governments at all levels, regional health professionals, and service providers should be equipped to address the growing number of people living with dementia in regional, rural and remote communities. Dementia Australia endorses the need for clear dementia support pathways and building workforce capability in aged and other health care services, in conjunction with coordinated planning, resourcing, costing, and funding of dementia services, to meet current and future population needs in these areas.

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ⁱAIHW. (2021). Older Australians living in rural and remote communities.

ⁱⁱAIHW. (2021). Older Australians living in rural and remote communities.

ⁱⁱⁱAIHW. (2021). Older Australians living in rural and remote communities.

^{iv}AIHW. (2021). Older Australians living in rural and remote communities.

^vAIHW. (2021). Older Australians living in rural and remote communities.

^{vi}Sansoni, J., Duncan, C., Grootemaat, P., Capell, J., Samsa, P., & Westera, A. (2016). Younger Onset Dementia: A Review of the Literature to Inform Service Development. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease & Other Dementias*, 31(8), 693–705. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1533317515619481>

^{vii}ABS. (2016). Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Canberra: ABS.

^{viii}ABS. (2016). Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Canberra: ABS.

^{ix}ABS. (2016). Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Canberra: ABS.

^xRoyal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (2019)

^{xi}P. S., Lakhani HV, (2020). Systematic review of clinical insights into novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: persisting challenges in US rural population', *Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(12):1-14 doi:10.3390

^{xii}Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (2019)