

New report suggests over 324,000 people in New South Wales may be missing out on crucial medical assistance

- *New Australian Lung Foundation research highlights barriers needing urgent attention to ensure people with lung disease can gain access to essential rehabilitative therapies –*

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The majority of people with lung disease in New South Wales may be missing out on critical therapies, many because they don't know they have the disease, The Australian Lung Foundation and leading medical specialists have said today.

The Australian Lung Foundation report, which was presented to The Health Minister's office on 27 September,¹ highlights a number of barriers which prevent access to basic rehabilitative programs – called pulmonary rehabilitation – in New South Wales.

The research identifies several major barriers to treatment, chiefly transport difficulties as well as low awareness among patients and GPs of the available rehabilitative programs.² The study also shows a significant funding gap: half of the identified pulmonary rehabilitation programs are funded solely through redirecting already stretched hospital budgets.²

“The Australian Lung Foundation estimates that three out of four people in New South Wales with COPD are unaware they have the disease. This means over 324,000 people with COPD in the state may not be accessing critical therapies, including pulmonary rehabilitation, that can have significant health benefits,” said Mr William Darbishire, CEO of The Australian Lung Foundation.

“While New South Wales has, in recent years, been increasing its focus on chronic lung disease,” said Mr Darbishire, “there is more that needs to be done.”

“For example, the establishment of 1,000 new pulmonary rehabilitation spots, along with ongoing hospital and community programs to maintain the benefits of pulmonary rehabilitation, would significantly benefit the wellbeing of people with lung disease in New South Wales,” Mr. Darbishire added. “An increase in programs would also make it more likely that patients experiencing transport difficulties could access a program closer to where they live.”

Mr Darbishire explained that plans presented today could save an estimated \$38-87 million over four years.³ For instance, pulmonary rehabilitation has been shown to reduce hospital admissions by between 25-50%⁴⁻⁶ for people with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), resulting in significant cost savings to the health system.

COPD is a long term disease of the lungs that includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis, which causes shortness of breath. It is Australia's fifth⁷ biggest killer, second⁸ most common cause of avoidable hospitalisations, and third⁹ leading cause of disease burden after heart disease and stroke.

The Australian Lung Foundation estimates that up to one in six* people in New South Wales aged 45 or over has some form of COPD.¹⁰ This equates to approximately 430,000 people in New South Wales,¹¹ up to half of whom may go on to have advanced lung disease which requires therapeutic intervention such as pulmonary rehabilitation¹².

Professor Christine Jenkins, Head of Asthma Group at The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research and National Council member of The Australian Lung Foundation, said that improving access to pulmonary rehabilitation could make a big difference in improving the lung health of people in New South Wales.

“While New South Wales has the highest overall number of pulmonary rehabilitation programs in the country, they lack a central funding mechanism, most being supported by existing hospital resources. Additionally, program coordinators overwhelmingly identify lack of awareness on the part of primary care providers as a major barrier preventing patient access to these programs; simply put, people with COPD in New South Wales cannot benefit from pulmonary rehabilitation if they don’t even know it’s available.”

In addition to pulmonary rehabilitation, The Australian Lung Foundation has identified two other crucial avenues to improve the lives of people with COPD in New South Wales:

- *Access to home oxygen:* In New South Wales, access to oxygen is only partially funded by outside sources, with most coming from the patient. Some oxygen supply programs carry waiting lists for certain items, and portable oxygen cylinders are only provided to children, meaning patients with COPD must be housebound while they receive their therapy. By providing a funding outlay of only \$180-\$200 per month per assessed patient, people in New South Wales may be able to enjoy potentially longer and higher-quality lives than they would without oxygen therapy;¹³⁻¹⁶ in fact, after four to six weeks, many may be so improved as to no longer need oxygen treatment.¹⁷
- *Improved community awareness:* Three out of four people in New South Wales who have COPD are not aware they have the condition.¹⁸ This means they are not taking the crucial steps to manage their condition and stem its progress. A statewide community awareness campaign can not only help in the early diagnosis and management of COPD, but can prevent new cases from developing by making people aware of its contributing influences (primarily smoking). In addition, the program would also educate GPs about the availability of local pulmonary rehabilitation programs for their patients.

Other previous research findings from COPD patients include:¹⁹

- Pulmonary rehabilitation is the number one reason why people with COPD report experiencing an improvement in their well-being since diagnosis; of those patients who are able to access this treatment, 82% select it. Other important interventions nominated include: support from doctors (76%), medication (76%), support from other healthcare professionals (65%) and joining a local COPD support group (61%).
- Treatment and support is important, as within the first six months of being diagnosed 52% of patients said they had feelings of depression.

People with COPD and their carers can contact The Australian Lung Foundation for information to help them understand and best manage their condition, as well as to put them in contact with local support groups,. For further information, help and support please call for free on 1800 654 301 or visit The Australian Lung Foundation website at www.lungnet.com.au

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Editor’s notes:

- (*) Research undertaken in three inner south-eastern Melbourne electorates among 1,224 adults aged between 45 and 69 (95% CI, 15.3% - 21.6%).⁸
- Queensland prevalence figures calculated using ABS 45+ population data,⁹ and separate research showing up to one in six⁸ Australians aged 45 or over has the condition.

***FURTHER INFORMATION**

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