

## **New report suggests over 33,000 Tasmanians 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 Tasmanians with lung disease may be missing out on critical therapies, The Australian Lung Foundation and leading medical specialists have said today.

The Australian Lung Foundation report, which will be presented to Health Minister Lara Giddings today,<sup>1</sup> highlights that there are a number of barriers which prevent access to basic rehabilitative programs – called pulmonary rehabilitation – in Tasmania.

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.<sup>2</sup> The study also shows a significant funding gap: half of the identified pulmonary rehabilitation programs are funded solely through redirecting already stretched hospital budgets.<sup>2</sup>

“The Australian Lung Foundation estimates that over 33,000 Tasmanians may be missing out on significant health benefits because they are unable to access pulmonary rehabilitation in Tasmania,” said Ms Heather Allan, Executive Director of The Australian Lung Foundation.

“While the Tasmanian health system in many ways is doing well in their support of people with lung disease,” said Ms. Allan, “there is more that needs to be done.”

“For example, the establishment of 360 new pulmonary rehabilitation spots, along with ongoing hospital and community programs to maintain the benefits of pulmonary rehabilitation, could significantly benefit the wellbeing of Tasmanians with lung disease,” Ms. Allan 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.”

Ms Allan explained that under the plans, the Tasmanian Government would save local taxpayers an estimated \$3-8 million over four years.<sup>3</sup> For instance, pulmonary rehabilitation has been shown to reduce hospital admissions by between 25-50%<sup>4-6</sup> 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 fifth<sup>7</sup> biggest killer, second<sup>8</sup> most common cause of avoidable hospitalisations, and third<sup>9</sup> leading cause of disease burden after heart disease and stroke.

The Australian Lung Foundation estimates that up to one in six\* Tasmanians aged 45 or over have some form of COPD.<sup>10</sup> This equates to approximately 33,000 people in Tasmania,<sup>11</sup> up to half of whom will go on to have advanced lung disease which requires therapeutic intervention such as pulmonary rehabilitation<sup>12</sup>.

Dr James Markos, Respiratory Physician at Launceston General Hospital and Chairman of the Tasmanian branch of The Australian Lung Foundation, said that improving access to pulmonary rehabilitation could make a big difference in improving the lung health of Tasmanians.

“Waiting lists vary widely depending on the program within Tasmania, with patients having to wait for access to pulmonary rehabilitation for many weeks and up to a year (longer now in Launceston). This delayed access for pulmonary rehabilitation is counter-intuitive and counter-productive for one of the most important therapies available to improve the symptoms of COPD

and to reduce the costs associated with hospitalisation for exacerbations of the condition. There is a clear need to improve patient access and to increase the funding for the benefits of pulmonary rehabilitation in Tasmania.”

In addition to pulmonary rehabilitation, The Australian Lung Foundation has identified two other crucial avenues to improve the lives of Tasmanians with COPD:

- *Access to home oxygen:* In Tasmania, access to oxygen depends heavily on which hospital catchment area a patient resides in (especially with regards to the Northern region versus the Southern region). Some oxygen programs may have exercise requirements, while others may not offer a portable unit depending on the litres per minute required. By providing a funding outlay of only \$180-\$200 per month per assessed patient, Tasmanians may be able to enjoy potentially longer and higher-quality lives than they would without oxygen therapy;<sup>13-16</sup> in fact, after four to six weeks, many may be so improved as to no longer need oxygen treatment.<sup>17</sup>
- *Improved community awareness:* Three out of four people in Tasmania who have COPD are not aware they have the condition.<sup>18</sup> 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:<sup>19</sup>

- 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](http://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%).<sup>8</sup>
- Tasmanian prevalence figures calculated using ABS 45+ population data,<sup>9</sup> and separate research showing up to one in six<sup>8</sup> Australians aged 45 or over has the condition.

### \*FURTHER INFORMATION

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