

**Submission
No 20**

**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE No. 2
RECOMMENDATIONS RELATING TO THE DELIVERY OF SPECIFIC HEALTH
SERVICES AND SPECIALIST CARE IN REMOTE, RURAL AND REGIONAL NSW**

Organisation: Arthritis NSW

Date Received: 17 April 2024

Arthritis NSW

Arthritis NSW is a leading provider of support and education for people with arthritis and works to empower the individual to manage their own condition and health. We are a trusted source of timely, evidence-based information on arthritis and its treatment, with education programs delivered across several platforms, including webinars, workshops, and community awareness sessions.

Arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions affect people of all ages, including children and young adults, and are some of the most common, costly and disabling chronic conditions in Australia. This disease group is the third leading cause of burden of disease¹, and a leading cause of disability and early retirement due to ill health, costing \$1.1 billion a year in extra welfare payments and lost taxation revenue, as well as \$7.2 billion in lost GDP².

Submission Context

The NSW Government's 2022-32 Future Health Report found that, over the coming decade, demand for health services is expected to rise as an ageing population with more complex and chronic conditions increases pressure on health services. It also notes that one third of the NSW population lives in regional areas, where population growth will be slower, but ageing will be faster than in metropolitan locations. In line with the findings from the Future Health Report, Arthritis NSW believes that NSW Health and the Government should increase funding for critical services in rural and regional areas which will help to address the rising demand for health services over the coming decades, reduce out of pocket costs for patients, and improve access to and training of NSW's specialist workforce.

Arthritis NSW welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Terms of Reference of the *Inquiry into the implementation of Portfolio Committee No. 2 recommendations relating to the delivery of specific health services and specialist care in remote, rural and regional NSW*. In this submission, we intend to respond to point g of the Terms of Reference and, in doing so, detail the challenges facing Australians living with arthritis in regional and rural areas of the state.

Access to healthcare services in regional and remote areas

As noted in our submission to the ongoing *Special Commission of Inquiry into Healthcare Funding*³, Arthritis NSW believes there is a persistent and profound shortage of rheumatologists in NSW, falling well below international standards. The 2023 Workforce Report by the Australian Rheumatology Association notes the need for 682 rheumatologists and 61 paediatric rheumatologists to meet these standards. This means there is likely a shortfall of 302 adult rheumatologists and 41 paediatric rheumatologists. Additionally, workforce shortages are exacerbated by an ageing workforce and burnout.

Arthritis NSW believes NSW Health can help to address these shortages through: increased public sector resources; improved collaboration between private and public rheumatologists; and increased support for current rheumatologists. Further, Arthritis NSW would advocate for more training and upskilling of specialists and allied health professionals. Consumers have cited numerous examples of engagements with health professionals which have resulted in sub-optimal diagnosis, referral and/or treatment and management outcomes. There is also a need for additional training to be provided to General Practitioners and allied health professionals on arthritis and musculoskeletal diseases, which is evident given their continued rise in the current NSW population.

Recommendation: Initiate a review of NSW's specialist workforce (e.g., Paediatric Rheumatologist/Allied health) allocations, public/private distributions, and increased arthritis-specific training and awareness within tertiary care settings.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) Australian Burden of Disease Study 2023, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 25 January 2024.

² Schofield DJ, Shrestha RN, Cunich M 2016. Counting the cost: the current and future burden of arthritis. Part 2 Economic Costs. Arthritis Australia 2016

³ Arthritis NSW, Submission to NSW Government's Special Commission of Inquiry into Healthcare Funding, 6 November 2023.

Arthritis Exercise Programs – Digital & Rural Programs

Exercise is one of the most effective management strategies for arthritis and can also delay or avoid expensive joint replacement surgery. This is because exercise increases strength and flexibility which can help to decrease arthritis symptoms like joint pain and fatigue.

At Arthritis NSW, we have developed an online group exercise program to help people living with arthritis to get active with exercises that are safe and beneficial to arthritis management. Arthritis Moves is a virtual group exercise program designed to help people living with arthritis increase their physical activity. Participants can attend weekly classes from the comfort of their home with an instructor coaching them through a live exercise session. The Queensland Government has partnered with Arthritis Queensland to deliver free and heavily subsidised digital exercise classes.

Additionally, Arthritis NSW conducts rural health education program which are co-run with local community organisations to ensure each event is tailored to the needs of the local community. In these sessions, we cover a range of topics including arthritis management, pain management, exercising with arthritis, and nutrition. Where possible, we also endeavour to establish warm water exercise classes which are led by trained health professionals.

Recommendation: Increase access to community arthritis exercise programs to help people with arthritis undertake more physical activity to better manage their condition and to reduce demand for medicines and surgery while also reducing out of pocket costs.

Artificial Intelligence

Arthritis NSW welcomes the recently announced *NSW AI Healthcare Taskforce*. We firmly believe that AI will be an important tool to confront some of the long-term challenges facing the healthcare system, including an increased prevalence of conditions associated with ageing and an escalating number of conditions associated with chronic disease. As the NSW Government's 2022-32 Future Health Report points out, these factors will lead to rising demand for health services over the coming decades. Artificial Intelligence will likely be an important tool to help care for people with these conditions and for those located in hard to reach areas, such as regional and rural NSW.

Arthritis NSW is currently developing an AI powered system called 'Clara'. Clara will be one of the go-to tools for people living with arthritis to help them 'live well' with their condition. Clara is trained on a vast catalogue of content and is able to source answers to a user's questions and point them to relevant, accurate, and personalised information, links, tools, assets, and activities, both for online and in-person. We anticipate that Clara will be an integral tool to help people live well with their arthritis. Clara featured in the Arthritis NSW pre-budget submission and in continuing dialogue with the Health Minister, Agency for Clinical Innovation (ACI) and the NSW AI Healthcare Taskforce.

Recommendation: Explore opportunities, potentially through the AI Healthcare Taskforce, to partner with not-for-profits to deliver innovative and carefully designed healthcare information products to consumers in regional and rural areas.

Local Health Districts

Community engagement and co-design have played a pivotal role in shaping Arthritis NSW's services. Everyone benefits from this approach. Involving affected communities in identification, planning, and improvement processes has proven beneficial, particularly in refining programs like our kids' camps, webinars, and the rural health programs.

In recent months, Arthritis NSW has increased our engagement with the federal Primary Health Networks in NSW. This engagement has been useful in improving our understanding of the local area and the primary health concerns and gaps that may exist. Additionally, this has improved our understanding of what resources are available to organisations such as ours. In response to recommendations 5, 42, and 43, Arthritis NSW would welcome any reform which promotes greater consumer involvement for enhanced value-based care in the healthcare ecosystem.

Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis

Juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA) is a type of arthritis that affects children under 16 years of age. JIA causes the immune system to attack the body's healthy cells, including joints and tissues. Currently there are no medical tests to diagnose JIA, instead, multiple examinations may be required. Children with JIA require treatment plans facilitated by a paediatric rheumatologist, which may include managing joint stiffness, inflammation, or pain and medication for long-term outcomes.

Arthritis NSW assists children suffering from JIA by providing a range of support services and programs aimed at developing self-management skills of children suffering from JIA, including relevant pain treatment and management resources. Our goal is to help children and young people with arthritis – as well as their families – to develop the self-management skills that will enable them to enjoy full and active lives. Our kids' camps provide children and young people living with JIA an opportunity to participate in fun and educational activities, in a safe and supportive environment, without fear of being different.

Treating JIA requires a collaborative approach involving a team of healthcare professionals. Early diagnosis and treatment are crucial in managing JIA and preventing long-term damage. Parents and caregivers can support children with JIA by encouraging them to follow treatment plans, including taking medication as prescribed, attending regular appointments, and engaging in physical therapy. Moreover, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including a balanced diet, regular exercise, and adequate sleep, may also help manage symptoms and improve overall well-being.

Additionally, experiences like Arthritis NSW's Camp Footloose provide unique opportunities for children and young people living with arthritis to meet others who share similar experiences and gain a sense of control over their condition. Our dedicated team of leaders and staff are committed to making the camp an unforgettable experience for everyone involved.

Recommendation: Explore opportunities to collaborate with not-for-profits to deliver services to children and young people living with JIA.

Conclusion

Arthritis NSW believes that, now more than ever, it is important to invest in services, such as ours, which can help people in remote, rural and regional areas to learn about and manage their condition. We once again thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry. Please do not hesitate to get in contact, via the details below, if you require any additional information on the services and programs detailed within this submission. Arthritis NSW believes NSW Health should:

- Initiate a review of NSW's specialist workforce (e.g., Paediatric Rheumatologist/Allied health) allocations, public/private distributions, and increased arthritis-specific training and awareness within tertiary care settings.
- Increase access to community arthritis exercise programs to help people with arthritis undertake more physical activity to better manage their condition and to reduce demand for medicines and surgery while also reducing out of pocket costs.
- Explore opportunities, potentially through the AI Healthcare Taskforce, to partner with not-for-profits to deliver innovative and carefully designed healthcare information products to consumers in regional and rural areas.
- Explore opportunities to collaborate with not-for-profits to deliver services to children and young people living with JIA.



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