



### Caring for Carers: an issue for the whole community

One of the most important roles for our organisation as stated in our Strategic Directions 2012 - 2015 plan is to 'Consult with carers, foster research and collect and analyse data to build the evidence base on which carer issues can be progressed'.

Data that our staff have been analysing recently has come from recent research into carers' health. It is not the first time that carers' own health has been raised in this newsletter but recent research tells us that carers are still ignoring their own health needs, to their detriment and to the detriment of their families and the people for whom they care. We need to talk about this issue again in light of this recent research and ask what we can do, firstly to help carers understand that caring for their own health is essential, and next to bring to the attention of those health professionals coming into contact with carers the stark reality of carers' poor physical and mental health.

We know caring comes at a cost – to education, employment, social life, financial security and health. It is a fact that carers have poorer health and wellbeing than non-carers. And that cost is not limited to the carer – it impacts on our whole community.

NSW Ministry of Health is trying to address the serious issue of carers' health by implementing carer health assessments by Public Sector Agencies coming into contact with carers as

mandated by the Carers (Recognition) Act 2010. That is an excellent initiative but it is not enough. The fact is that carers' first port of call for health advice for themselves and their families is usually the general practitioner, or allied health professionals like pharmacists, dentists, podiatrists, physiotherapists and psychologists. As a group these professionals provide what is called primary care.

Recent research highlights the need for carer awareness amongst primary care professionals for better health outcomes for both the carer and the person for whom they care.

In the study Wellbeing of Australians: carer health and wellbeing Deakin University 2007, researchers found that ... 'Carers have the lowest collective wellbeing of any group we have yet discovered.'

Further research ... 'An individual assessment of the caregiving situation may help identify carers at risk of physical and mental ill health, and facilitate the provision of information and support that will assist them to continue caring for their frail older family member or friend,' (Aggar, C. et al 2012).

This is important information for primary care professionals and the community at large. After all, turning attention to, and assessing, carers, as well as treating the person for whom they care, not only impacts upon the physical and mental health of the carer, but enables the caring relationship to be more sustainable!

Many primary health professionals believe they are already carer-aware, however...

'When first asked, social workers, nurses and doctors in this study all claimed that they already assessed caregiver needs and responded to those needs, but this study suggests that carers highly value dedicated assessment that is not seen as an add-on to patient assessment. This assessment involves defining the person as a carer, actively seeking them out (not as a passive process because the carer happens to be present at consultations), and assessing their needs as a carer as well as more broadly,' (Green, A. et al 2012).

Most importantly, 'While the general practitioner is seen as central to coordinating service delivery, they often do not fulfil this role. Our data suggest that priorities for action are raising community awareness on the availability of services for carers, normalising service-use, destigmatising dementia and encouraging health professionals to follow the example of social workers in making referrals,' (Brodaty, H. et al 2005).

Carers NSW works to bring to the attention of all involved in primary care the information provided by this research and the research we conduct ourselves. We suggest that Carers' Support Groups consider advocating for carers' health needs by building relationships with their Medicare Local, organisations funded by Federal Government to plan and fund extra health services in 61 communities across Australia. These Medicare Locals are working with GPs and other primary health care providers to ensure all Australians can access effective primary health care services. Some Medicare Locals are carer aware. Some are not. Remedying that is the task ahead for us all.

Laraine Toms  
President

#### References

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