

NATIONAL AGED CARE ALLIANCE

POSITION STATEMENT

Meeting the Allied Health needs of older people in residential aged care

About the National Aged Care Alliance

The National Aged Care Alliance (the Alliance) comprises 52 peak body organisations representing consumers and their families, informal carers, special needs groups, nursing, allied health and personal carers involved in the aged care sector, and private and not-for-profit aged care providers. As a leading voice for improvements to aged care for the past decade, the Alliance strives to implement its vision for ageing in Australia, that:

Every older Australian is able to live well, with dignity and independence, as part of their community and in a place of their choosing, with a choice of appropriate and affordable support and care services when they need them.

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Allied health services are an integral part of a high quality residential aged care system

The National Aged Care Alliance has developed this paper to call for government commitment to a funding model that ensures access to allied health services¹ according to assessed need for older Australians in residential aged care.

The National Aged Care Alliance considers allied health an integral part of team-based, multi-disciplinary provision of high-quality care to older people in residential aged care.

The National Aged Care Alliance recognises that older people in residential aged care facilities need increased access to the broad scope of practice of allied health professions and their critical services.

Allied health professionals provide high quality care in the residential aged care setting, working alongside and with personal care and nursing staff, lifestyle coordinators, diversional therapists, dental practitioners, general practitioners, geriatricians and others. However, despite the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety ('the Royal Commission') noting the clear benefits of allied health for older people, and that inadequate access to these services contributed to concerns regarding current aged care quality and safety, there has been no clear commitment made by the Commonwealth as to how funding for allied health services in residential aged care will be accessed to achieve the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

Older people in residential aged care have a broad range of care needs. Funding models must ensure the input of all of the broad multidisciplinary team to meet the needs of people in residential aged care. It is likely that there will be different funding arrangements that are suitable for different parts of this multidisciplinary team. Funding for nursing, personal care, and some other occupations such as lifestyle coordinators and diversional therapists are likely to be best funded through the primary aged care funding and classification mechanisms, such as AN-ACC. Allied health services, which respond to assessed individual clinical needs of residents need a clearly identified separately funded component to ensure these needs are addressed, in addition to other ongoing care needs.

Older people living in residential aged care, including those with multiple comorbidities, chronic and progressive conditions and end of life needs benefit from the broad range of allied health professionals who prevent, diagnose and manage a range of conditions and illnesses

As part of multi-disciplinary teams, allied health professionals play an important role in:

- Improving quality of life (for example, addressing pain, psychological and behavioural symptoms, communication, hearing loss and mobility)
- Preventing deterioration and serious events (for example, through dietary and swallowing interventions, psychological management and falls prevention)
- Reducing emergency department admissions and preventable hospitalisations (for example via early assessment and management of chronic conditions, falls risks, dysphagia).

A clear action plan is needed to ensure allied health access in residential care

Despite a two-year Royal Commission and with significant reform underway, the issue of poor access to needs-based allied health care in the residential aged care setting remains largely unaddressed. The government response to the Royal Commission recommendations regarding allied health access has included:

- Acceptance of Recommendation 36 (Care at Home to include allied health) with Support at Home Program redesign work underway with a recognised need to embed allied health within assessment and support plan categories.

At this stage, National Aged Care Alliance recognises that the Government is responding to the Royal Commission's recommendations regarding allied health in home care though it is not yet clear whether the assessment and funding model will adequately account for allied health needs.

- 'In-principle' support of Recommendation 38 (Residential care to include allied health): Unlike home care, there are no clear actions, funding or timelines that have been articulated by the government as to how this inadequate access to allied health in residential aged care will be addressed. The Government response does not refer to allied health service provisions benchmarks and devolves funding issues to the AN-ACC funding tool which in its present form is not designed for this purpose. In addition, the 2021-22 Federal Budget did not allocate any funding to allied health provision in residential aged care.
- 'In-principle' support of Recommendation 58 (access to specialists and other health practitioners including allied health through Multidisciplinary Outreach Services): the government response suggests that this would need to be progressed through consultation between Commonwealth and State/Territory governments, though no clear timelines have been provided.

As the Royal Commission has noted, the impacts of inadequate access to allied health care are being experienced by older people now. Additionally, with no clear plan in sight for allied health in residential aged care there is a real risk that allied health professionals – a largely part-time and contractor workforce – will look to seek greater job security in other sectors including home care and NDIS. Anecdotally, this allied health workforce stress and loss from the sector is already being reported as occurring and requires urgent attention.

A clear plan with articulated timelines needs to be urgently developed to ensure access to allied health services according to clinical need within residential aged care settings.

Older people cannot afford to wait any longer for the allied health services they need.

Recommendations

1. That the Commonwealth urgently address the lack of articulated plans regarding allied health funding in residential aged care. A clear action plan to achieve the recommendations for allied health of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety in a timely way must be developed, as part of the overarching plans to ensure access to the required multidisciplinary aged care workforce.
As a matter of urgency, the Commonwealth must assure, clearly articulate and set out in a clear pathway for:
 - Funding in the aged care classification model to ensure the inclusion of the broad care workforce in addition to personal care staff and nursing including oral health therapists, recreational officers, lifestyle staff, diversional therapy, welfare officers, spiritual care and pastoral care
 - Funding a separate dedicated component for the assessment and delivery of allied health services responding to individual needs of older people in residential aged care; and
 - the mechanisms for appropriate clinical needs assessment and delivery; and
 - monitoring and public accountability for that assessment and service delivery by individual profession/service.
2. That the Commonwealth engages with and directly involves the allied health sector in the development of a best practice needs assessment and care planning tool as recommended in the development of AN-ACC: A national classification and funding model for residential aged care: synthesis and consolidated recommendations, The Resource Utilisation and Classification Study: Report 6.
3. That the Commonwealth outlines an appropriate funding mechanism to ensure all older Australians in residential aged care have access to the allied health services to meet assessed need, regardless of where they live.
4. That the Commonwealth take responsibility for and recognise allied health professionals as part of the broader aged care workforce across all workforce initiatives.
5. That the Commonwealth take action to retain and support a strong and sustainable allied health workforce including appropriate remuneration, career pathways and supervision/training opportunities.
6. That the Commonwealth invest in research and health economic analysis of best practice models to contribute to service design inclusive of allied health in aged care.
7. That the Commonwealth ensure mechanisms are in place to collect and review data on allied health service usage and expenditure in residential aged care, in accordance with Royal Commission recommendations.

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