

## *AASW Submission to the Primary Health Care Advisory Group: Summary of main points*

The prevalence of chronic illnesses presents one of the most significant health challenges in Australia as they are the leading cause of illness, disability and death<sup>1</sup>. In Australia, chronic illnesses are most prevalent in the more disadvantaged sectors of the population; these include people from diverse cultural and Indigenous backgrounds, socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, abuse victims and survivors, rural populations and people with disabilities. It is important to acknowledge the higher prevalence of chronic illnesses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As many as two thirds of deaths for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are accounted for by diseases of the circulatory system, respiratory system, and endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases and self-reported diabetes is almost four times as high as for other Australians.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, chronic illnesses are major contributors to the mortality and health gap between Indigenous and other Australians.<sup>3</sup> These concerning statistics present an inequality in terms of outcomes that highlights the significance of understanding the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of chronic illnesses.

The Australian system of chronic illness prevention and management is fragmented. This leads to poorly coordinated care that is not client centred and contrary to best practice guidelines. The current model of funding has created 'professional silos' where medical and allied health workers work independently of each other leading to poor overall services and outcomes, especially for those in lower socioeconomic and disadvantaged groups. Social workers provide a range of interventions and supports in relation to chronic illnesses including psychosocial assessments, counselling, resourcing, advocacy, group, community and multidisciplinary work. Most importantly, social workers play a key role in the coordination of care as they have the necessary value orientation and expertise in collaboration, resource management and advocacy.<sup>3</sup> Best practice guidelines identify care coordination as a key strategy to deal with the prevention, management and treatment of chronic conditions.<sup>4</sup> In order to improve the health and wellbeing outcomes for those with chronic illnesses, management and prevention needs to be underpinned by a clear focus on the coordination and collaboration of services as no single profession has the expertise necessary to address its complexity.

Professional social workers, with their knowledge and skills in addressing the psychosocial aspects of health, play a central role in the delivery of coordinated services as their assessments and interventions can also contribute greatly to the decision-making processes of other health professionals. Social workers are particularly skilled in dealing with complex social issues and relationship building. Social work interventions (including assessments, counselling, group work, program development, education, resourcing and referrals) can help identify and overcome factors that may be contributing to ill-health and that may be inhibiting and limiting the sustainable management, and in some cases prevention, of chronic illnesses, including social isolation, mental health issues, family breakdowns and poor health literacy.<sup>5</sup>

Chronic illnesses prevention and management presents one of the most significant health challenges in Australia. Significant reform of the health care system is required in order to foster collaborative models of care in order to improve the health and wellbeing outcomes for those with our community with chronic illnesses.

<sup>1</sup> AIHW 2011b. *Key indicators of progress for chronic disease and associated determinants: data report*. Cat. no. PHE 142. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>2</sup> Reading J, 2014, *The crisis of chronic disease among Aboriginal people*, University of Victoria Centre for Aboriginal Health Research.

<sup>3</sup> Allen K & Spitzer WJ, 2015, *Social work practice in healthcare: Advanced approaches and emerging trends*, Sage Publications, UK.

<sup>4</sup> McDonald K & United States Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality & Stanford-UCSF Evidence-based Practice Center & National Library of Medicine, 2007, 'Vol. 7 Care coordination a critical analysis of quality improvement strategies', *Closing the quality gap*, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, USA.

<sup>5</sup> Cox LS, Moczygemba LR, Dungee-Anderson D, Goode, JVR, Gatewood S, Alexander A & Osborn R, 2014, 'Collaboration between Schools of Pharmacy and Social Work to promote care for a medically underserved population', *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 6(4), 535-542.