



MUSCULOSKELETAL  
AUSTRALIA

## **Musculoskeletal Australia 2020–21 Pre-budget Submission**

Musculoskeletal Australia is a consumer-driven organisation working to support people for better musculoskeletal health. We work on behalf of the nearly 7 million Australians living with conditions such as osteoarthritis, back pain, rheumatoid arthritis, gout, osteoporosis, fibromyalgia and more than 150 different musculoskeletal conditions.

Musculoskeletal Australia has been supporting people with arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions for 50 years. Our organisation started in 1968, when Dr Leslie Koadlow, a rheumatologist, decided things could be better to support people living with these conditions.

Fifty years later, we're still helping people with information and support and via our policy and advocacy work. We provide comprehensive online information, telephone support and information via our national Help Line, education via consumer-focused webinars, comprehensive resources for children with JIA, their families and teachers and a network of in-person and online peer support groups.

Musculoskeletal Australia works in partnership with other relevant groups, including health professionals, universities, research organisations and government to achieve its aims.

### **The health, social and economic burden of musculoskeletal conditions**

Musculoskeletal conditions are the second largest contributor to disability worldwide, with low back pain being the single leading cause of disability globally. Almost 1 in 3 (29%) of Australians had a musculoskeletal condition in 2017–18, around 7.0 million people (AIHW, 2019).

Musculoskeletal conditions and injuries are not just conditions of older age – they are relevant across the life-course. They significantly limit mobility and dexterity, leading to early retirement from work, reduced socio-economic circumstances and reduced ability to participate in social roles. The greatest proportion of persistent pain conditions is accounted for by musculoskeletal conditions (WHO, 2019).

Most people with a musculoskeletal condition, such as arthritis or back pain, also have at least one other chronic disease. AIHW data show that almost 4 in 5 (79%) people with arthritis and 2 in 3 (65%) people with back pain and problems had at least 1 other chronic condition. Musculoskeletal conditions are often linked with depression with one in five Australians with arthritis experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress (AIHW, 2019).

Additionally, more than half (54%) the hospitalisations for musculoskeletal conditions involved at least one other chronic condition (AIHW, 2019). The exceedingly high prevalence of musculoskeletal conditions within the Australian population results in a \$9.2 billion direct health cost and further costs from reduced productivity (MOVE muscle, bone & joint health and PWC, 2017).

### **More focus, more funding needed**

Musculoskeletal Australia applauds the Government's recent support for the development and launch of the 'National strategic action plan for arthritis' in 2019. The development of the plan was well overdue given its 'predecessor', the 'National action Plan for osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis: A national health priority area' had been released in 2005. Musculoskeletal Australia is also pleased that some funding has been made available to support the implementation of aspects of the new national action plan.

Given the number of Australians with musculoskeletal conditions, Musculoskeletal Australia is highly concerned that the recent funding is not commensurate with the impact of musculoskeletal conditions on the Australian community and is instead, disproportionately meagre. As stated in the recent national action plan, 'there is a major mismatch between the burden of disease associated with arthritis and its prioritisation in policy and resourcing'. The level of government funding made available towards the end of 2019 via various grant opportunities perpetuates this situation rather than addresses it.

The reality is that the musculoskeletal health sector is gradually being defunded as evidenced by the following:

- 2002–2006: Commonwealth Government committed \$11.5 million over four years for the 'Better Arthritis Care Initiative';
- 2006–2010: there was a \$14.8 million Commonwealth Government commitment over four years for the 'Better Arthritis and Osteoporosis Care Initiative';
- 2010–2018: there has been no dedicated funding for arthritis or musculoskeletal conditions;
- 2019: there is a one-off Commonwealth Government commitment of \$4 million over four years.

Australia has an ageing population – the cohort of people aged 65 and over continues to grow and is projected to more than double by 2057 (AIHW, 2018). There is no cure for many musculoskeletal conditions and given the higher prevalence of musculoskeletal conditions in older age groups, the national economic and social burden of these health conditions will only continue to grow.

### **A consumer-driven focus is necessary**

Given the long-term and persistent nature of musculoskeletal conditions, people with these conditions must be key drivers in determining the nature of policy direction and service provision in relevant health areas – policies and healthcare services designed without their substantial input will have minimal chance of meeting their needs and will further exacerbate the difficulties they experience in managing their conditions and living their lives.

While other organisations represent the interests of diverse stakeholders working in the musculoskeletal health sector, Musculoskeletal Australia is the national voice of people with musculoskeletal conditions. In this role, Musculoskeletal Australia is solely committed to ensuring that consumer perspectives are present in all relevant health discussions and debates and that consumers are empowered to actively participate in the related decision-making and management of their health. Recurrent government funding for the work of Musculoskeletal Australia is required to ensure that musculoskeletal health consumer perspectives are present and represented in all relevant health matters.

***Cost: Recurrent funding of \$1 million each year***

### **Data science technologies for understanding consumer needs**

Musculoskeletal Australia is leading the not-for-profit, consumer health sector in the use of data science technologies to better understand the needs of consumers, but requires government support to fully realise the potential benefits. In its February 2019 report, AIHW identified significant gaps in the data landscape of Australian health; in particular, there was a distinct lack of quality national data in the area of musculoskeletal health.

Some of our key initiatives aimed at addressing these deficiencies and improving the underlying dataset and knowledge base, for the benefit of all stakeholders in public health, are:

- Development of National Consumer Data Collection and Governance Guidelines;
- Annual National Musculoskeletal Consumer Health Survey;
- Annual National Musculoskeletal Consumer Health Report;
- Development and implementation of the technical platforms and systems required to support our data science initiatives (hardware, software, programming);
- Establishment of publicly accessible dataset portal for results of the national survey and other aggregated datasets for use by researchers, industry, government and universities;
- Establishment of consumer data access portal to enable consumers to exert control over data that they provide (submit, review, edit, limit or delete);
- Development of artificial intelligence (AI) tools that can assist researchers and health professionals interrogate publicly available data;
- Development of user interface (UI) tools that can assist consumers to gain insights into how the collected data may be used to inform and educate them about living with their condition(s).

***Cost: \$5 million over 3 years***

## **The priority of self-care**

As a tenet of Musculoskeletal Australia's consumer-driven focus, we have a strong commitment to the importance of self-care and its place in the management of people's chronic health conditions. People have a right to be actively involved and in control of their health!

Recent work by the Australian Health Policy Collaboration confirmed that the state of self-care and self-management policy, programs and support in Australia is fragile at best. Musculoskeletal Australia strongly advocates that self-care be an essential component of a comprehensive approach to support and improve the health of people with musculoskeletal conditions. This would not only involve revised approaches to the philosophy and delivery of healthcare services (where self-care would be acknowledged as a key component), but also the development of information and resources to support people in their self-care efforts.

To this end, Musculoskeletal Australia is developing evidence-informed, online self-care resources for people with musculoskeletal conditions. These resources will be regularly updated as further evidence and information about consumer needs becomes available.

***Cost: \$3 million over 4 years***

## **Musculoskeletal telephone health coaching programs**

Consistent with the Australian Government's 'National strategic action plan for pain 2019' and the 'National strategic action plan for arthritis 2019', there is a need for the development of appropriate telephone coaching programs staffed by accredited and trained staff for national roll-out. Such programs should incorporate behaviour change strategies.

Musculoskeletal Australia has the only national Help Line (available 9am–5pm, 5 days a week) staffed by registered nurses with specialist training in musculoskeletal and rheumatic conditions, mental health first aid and health coaching. Musculoskeletal Australia is looking to expand this service to include a health coaching program consistent with other chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes, stroke and heart disease.

Such a program would provide tailored information and regular follow-ups to assist people achieve their health goals and would include:

- Confidential service supporting consumers to self-manage their musculoskeletal conditions through the provision of evidence-based information regarding diagnosis and management;
- Informing consumers on pain management and non-pharmacological strategies;
- Information regarding specific medications such as biologics, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications and opioids, as well as specialist services such as chronic disease management and pain management plans;
- Connecting consumers with relevant community health services and community activities such as hydrotherapy pools, Tai Chi classes or walking groups in their local area;
- Assisting consumers to navigate the complex health, disability and social service sectors through the provision of established service navigation pathways for all Australians with musculoskeletal conditions;

- Linking people with peer support groups either in their local community or online. (Musculoskeletal Australia supports 55 peer support groups in regional and metropolitan areas and is looking to further expand its peer support network).

***Cost: \$5.8 million over 5 years***

### **Workplace – an important setting for priority focus**

Evidence shows that working is good for a person's health; even for those that are unwell or injured remaining in work, in some capacity, can improve recovery. Work is a vital part of modern life – it provides people with an income and can be an invaluable source of purpose and meaning.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that those with chronic conditions, which includes musculoskeletal pain, will find it more difficult to maintain employment across their life course. Furthermore, a review of 42 published studies found lower back pain was associated with time off work, financial pressures, the need to modify work tasks and concerns about loss of employment.

Musculoskeletal Australia proposes the development of a musculoskeletal health workplace program to:

- Increase awareness of the impact of musculoskeletal conditions in relation to work for both employees and employers;
- Help people living with musculoskeletal conditions manage at work through a suite of specialised programs across a number of areas including physical therapy, telephone support and health coaching, information resources and educational seminars on topics such as managing pain, career planning, nutrition and physical activity, among others;
- Support employers to develop and maintain a healthy and productive workplace environment in order to address absenteeism, staff turnover, workers' compensation, and medical claims;
- Program monitoring, evaluation and refinement.

The program will work with employers and employees to best suit their needs. As such the program will be tailored with clients able to choose one or all components of the program to best suit their requirements.

***Cost: \$5.3 million over 4 years***

### **Enabling high value care through the expansion of the pain-related items of the MBS**

Again, in line with the Australian Government's 'National strategic action plan for pain 2019' and the 'National strategic action plan for arthritis 2019', Musculoskeletal Australia supports the expansion of the pain-related items on the MBS to support multidisciplinary, patient-centred approaches to pain management for musculoskeletal conditions.

As highlighted in the recent Deloitte Access Economics report commissioned by Pain Australia, doubling current levels of access to multidisciplinary care could reduce health system costs by \$3.7 million (net of the \$70 million in intervention costs) for people with chronic pain.

We strongly recommend that the Federal budget makes provision for people with musculoskeletal conditions to access 10 individual services and 10 group services per calendar year based on clinical discretion (similar to the Better Access Mental Health Care program), including case conference attendance by a multidisciplinary team, seven telehealth services as part of the overall plan and specific supports, such as mental health services and allied health services.

### **Young people with JIA and the challenge of transition**

Arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions affect people of all ages, including approximately 250,000 young Australians under the age of 25 years. For many, it has a profound affect not only on their health but also on their:

- education;
- career prospects;
- personal relationships, and
- financial independence.

One of the recommended actions in the 'National strategic action plan for arthritis', is to develop age- and developmentally-appropriate resources and programs to support children and young people living with JIA and their families.

This is to be commended, especially given many young people in their mid-to-late adolescence 'drop off the radar' and lose a connection with any medical provider when transitioning from paediatric to adult health services. This can lead to serious and preventable illness-related complications and a higher risk of disability, pain and chronic diseases later in life. Adolescents and their families require support in the management of their musculoskeletal conditions to engender a willingness to engage in ongoing health support and treatment.

Musculoskeletal Australia is looking to build on the resources recently developed within its 'MSK Kids' program by developing sustainable, engaging and adolescent-focused resources that build essential knowledge and practical skills for adolescents (and their families) to ensure optimal transition of care between paediatric and adult health services, while also addressing broader adolescent health issues. Further resourcing for this important area should be within budget considerations.

***Cost: \$1.5 million over 4 years***

### **References**

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