

Building 'end of life care' capacity in community pharmacy

Supporting community pharmacists to enhance patient care



What?

Community pharmacies have an important role to play in supporting patients who have a life-limiting illness, from diagnosis to the last days of life. This is particularly so in regional and rural areas, where pharmacists have often known their customers for many years and are regarded as a trusted source of advice and support. Timely access to appropriate medicines is critical to optimise symptom management, and minimise both patient suffering and carer distress. By building the capacity of community pharmacists to support patients requiring end-of-life care services, COORDINARE has been able to strengthen the palliative care multidisciplinary team and enhance care coordination. This has led to a better experience for patients and their carers.

Why?


As the South Eastern NSW Primary Health Network, COORDINARE supports primary care in our region to be consumer-centred, accessible, and coordinated across all parts of the health system. Research has suggested that around 70% of people wish to die at home. To enable patients to avoid unwanted transfers to hospital as they near the end of their lives, appropriate palliative care must be available to them in the community. Essential to providing such care is ensuring that patients have timely access to appropriate end of life medicines and that carers are well supported. However, many community pharmacies do not routinely stock end of life medicines, and many pharmacists have received no specific palliative care related training. This limits their ability to support their customers during this time of need. With targeted training and resources, community pharmacists can significantly increase their ability to assist palliative patients and to support GPs and nurse practitioners in providing end-of-life care.

How?

Initially run as a pilot project in the Eurobodalla shire in 2019, the project was rolled out more broadly in 2020-21. With funding from COORDINARE, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (PSA) provided targeted training to community pharmacists in three key regional areas within South Eastern NSW. A number of resources were developed to highlight how community pharmacists can support people living with a life-limiting illness and their carers (see 'Resources developed').

Pharmacist Leads engaged by PSA approached community pharmacies in their area to offer training on palliative care, as well as to provide key contacts – such as their Local Health District palliative care team members – and links to relevant resources. Emphasis was placed on promoting the Core Palliative Care Medicines List for NSW Community Pharmacy (endorsed by the NSW Clinical Excellence Commission) as well as other similar locally relevant core medicines lists, and community pharmacists were encouraged to stock these medicines.

A community pharmacy section has been included in the 'Palliative Care Community and Support Services' tab of the ACT/SNSW HealthPathways, identifying those pharmacies committed to stocking core medicines. Changes have also been made to the 'New Palliative Care Patient' section of HealthPathways to support communication and collaboration between pharmacists and other key health professionals involved in the care of a palliative patient.



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Outcomes

Pharmacists:

79 pharmacists from **55 community pharmacies** completed palliative care training



Significantly improved knowledge about palliative care (from 55% to 89% post-training)



Improved ability to support customers at a time of need



Improved confidence to engage with customers about end of life care, in advance of a crisis



Resources developed:

- [Consumer-facing poster](#) to invite conversations with the pharmacist
- [Consumer brochure](#) to raise awareness of palliative-related pharmacy services
- Health professional brochure for [Illawarra Shoalhaven](#) and [Southern NSW](#) to raise awareness of community pharmacists as members of the palliative care multidisciplinary team
- Prescriber referral letter/template to advise a patient's nominated pharmacy of their life-limiting illness.

Customers:

Reassurance that palliative care medicines are locally available, when needed



Access to knowledgeable advice about the appropriate use of medicines for symptom control at home



Emotional and psychological support, both for patients and their carers



Pharmacies:

Improved customer service



Stronger connection between all pharmacy staff and customers



Enhanced connection to, and collaboration with, the local palliative care multidisciplinary team



Bereavement module:

With additional funding from COORDINARE, PSA has developed an online module to equip community pharmacists and staff with the skills to support families and caregivers in bereavement. Access the free module here: <https://bit.ly/3rxFe2>

Bente Hart

Pharmacist Lead,
Pharmaceutical Society of
Australia



I've learnt during my time as a pharmacist that having a good knowledge of end of life care is really important. It's awful to stand there thinking 'I'd like to help, but I've no idea how'. Giving pharmacists the tools they need empowers them to provide that care to their customers, many of whom they've known for a long time.

Too often, I've seen situations where carers need medications quickly, and it causes trauma when they can't get hold of them. As a pharmacist, you never know what's coming through the door. If you have the appropriate medicines ready to go, and are equipped with the knowledge to dispense them, you can be prepared.

Pharmacists can play a very important role in end of life care. By knowing early on that a customer is in palliative care, they can support the GP in ensuring the best care for that patient. And that leads to better outcomes for the whole community.

Brydie McDonald

Community Pharmacist,
Bradfordville Pharmacy



When our pharmacy was approached about palliative care training, I could see straight away how it would allow us to offer a better service for our customers. We're pretty close to our customers, so we wanted to be able to help them.

Before I did the training, palliative care was a bit of a mystery. Now, our practice is able to be part of the local palliative care team. We're involved with the GP and the Palliative Care Nurse, and are able to help them with things we pick up on, like patients having trouble taking tablets or measuring liquid medicines.

One of the best outcomes for me has been having more confidence to help people. It's so nice to be able to provide customers and their families with the support they need. We've often been dealing with the same people for years, so it's really satisfying to be able to see it through to the end.