

# Media release

Thursday 23 May 2024

## SHPA welcomes patient-focused recommendations in rare cancers Senate report

The Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA) welcomes the release of the [Senate report into equitable access to diagnosis and treatment for individuals with rare and less common cancers, including neuroendocrine cancer](#) which makes over 40 recommendations, including expanding access to medicines and supporting workforce development in cancer care, and the continual investment into telehealth services to bridge gaps in cancer service access and inequities.

SHPA, which has long advocated for equitable access to cancer medicines, gave evidence at the Melbourne Senate Hearing alongside representatives from the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP). This Report was supported by a [written submission](#) and evidence provided by SHPA representatives Shaun O'Connor FANZCAP (OncHaem, Compound.) and Jerry Yik FANZCAP (Lead&Mgmt, PublicHlth).

SHPA President Tom Simpson says, 'It is heartening that this Senate Inquiry has heard the call from all stakeholders that Australians need improved access to medicines for rare cancers. We spoke to this at the hearing and discussed the ethical quandaries our clinicians face when the lack of funding, subsidy or reimbursement for vital cancer medicines forces individual hospitals and patients to decide whether to self-fund what are very often highly expensive and specialised therapies, or to miss out.

'After multiple reviews in the last decade it is time to stop admiring the problem and get on with removing barriers to accessing the medicines and care that Australians require.

'The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme is designed to grant population-wide access to medicines, but for rare diseases, the PBS currently fails these patients in providing access to treatments – we are often dealing with small patient groups, limited evidence, and high cost. It is really pleasing to see that the Report recommends that the Government use the HTA Review which has recently been delivered, to support timely and affordable access to novel medicines, and we look forward to working with Government to help implement this recommendation.

'We also acknowledge the [Government's initiative announced this week](#) to link cancer services across the country through the launch of the Australian Comprehensive Cancer Network (ACCN). Such a network will go a long way to addressing current inequities in access to comprehensive cancer services especially for those groups who experience poor health outcomes.

The Report also highlighted the need to develop an appropriately skilled workforce in rare and less common cancers, and for workforce positions to be appropriately funded to ensure all chemotherapy and cancer care episodes are of the highest quality and safety.

Mr Simpson adds, 'The need for a highly-trained workforce could not be more important for these patients. Patients with rare diseases often face a long and challenging journey just to receive a definitive diagnosis, let alone understand their treatment options. These patients, and their families and carers, often have to tell their story many dozens of times to many different practitioners, putting the onus of health literacy onto patients who are already struggling with uncertainty. We want to see a health system in which every practitioner they encounter has the specialty and advanced skills needed to relieve patients of this burden.

'SHPA is proud to deliver an Australian-first Pharmacist Registrar Training Program in Oncology and Haematology, and convenes a Specialty Practice Group for the hundreds of pharmacists who provide specialist cancer pharmacy care to patients. We welcome support from state governments to ensure we can train and deliver the next generation of cancer care pharmacists across Australia.

The report also recommended investing in, and extending, telehealth services to allow patients to access chemotherapy treatment and comprehensive pharmacy care without the burden of travel.

SHPA President Mr Simpson says, 'We are pleased to see support for virtual care, and while it should not replace in-person services, we accept this is the solution we have today to fend off the workforce and skills shortages in cancer care and address the postcode lottery for our patients.

'We are proud to highlight Western Australian Country Health Service TeleChemotherapy Pharmacy Service – winner of SHPA's 2020 Hospital Team Innovation of the Year Award – as a current and nationally recognised example of delivering chemotherapy treatment to regional, rural and remote patients with the support of specialist metropolitan-based clinicians via telehealth health services.'

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**About SHPA**

The Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA) is the national, professional organisation for the 6,100+ Hospital Pharmacists, and their Hospital Pharmacist Intern and Hospital Pharmacy Technician colleagues working across Australia's health system, advocating for their pivotal role improving the safety and quality of medicines use. Embedded in multidisciplinary medical teams and equipped with exceptional medicines management expertise, SHPA members are progressive advocates for clinical excellence, committed to evidence-based practice and passionate about patient care.

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