

MEDIA RELEASE

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Feasible solutions to rural cancer care inequities

A coordinated, whole-of-government approach building on existing services would measurably reduce the inequity in access to cancer treatment in remote locations to be shown on tonight's [5 June] ABC TV Four Corners program, according to Australia's peak cancer professional body.

The Clinical Oncological Society of Australia (COSA), which commissioned the comparative study of regional cancer treatment services to be discussed in the program, is calling for the introduction of multidisciplinary cancer centres in regional cities to provide an essential link between metropolitan services and remote communities.

Dr Craig Underhill, a medical oncologist who heads COSA's regional and rural group and works in a successful multidisciplinary cancer centre in Albury-Wodonga, has seen firsthand the challenges of treating regional patients, along with the benefits of providing multidisciplinary care from a regional location.

"The COSA report confirms what we have long believed – that the further a person is from a metropolitan centre, the more restricted their access to cancer treatment and support services across all disciplines, which may help to explain the data showing survival rates also decrease with isolation," Dr Underhill said. "By mapping the problem in terms of hands-on service delivery, we are better able to propose feasible solutions."

Dr Underhill said introducing regional multidisciplinary centres would significantly reduce the impact of distance, by providing a relay point between large metropolitan centres and remote facilities. They would also improve access to multidisciplinary care, essential to best practice. A pilot study of an expansion to his own facility showed a significant, cost-effective improvement in service delivery.

"Initially centres should be established where radiotherapy capacity already exists or is flagged for introduction, providing the best use of an existing investment or commitment," he said. "Structural reforms in other areas, such as a quality assurance framework, distance education of health professionals caring for cancer patients, use of technology such as telemedicine, and better coordination of travel and accommodation schemes, would also reduce the geographic inequity in treatment access."

Dr Underhill said state/territory and federal government policy-makers had become increasingly committed to cancer treatment in recent years and had identified rural communities as high need, indicating that a whole-of-government commitment to rural cancer care reform was feasible.

The report, *Mapping rural and regional oncology services in Australia*, is available at:
www.cosa.org.au/publications

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