

KEY MESSAGES

The role of allied health in the management of complex conditions in a comprehensive primary care setting

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Policy context

Appropriate management of chronic and complex conditions requires the expertise of many professionals. The interaction between these professionals is not well understood. Ensuring appropriate interaction, particularly between general practitioners (GPs) and allied health professionals (AHPs) is essential to high quality care.

Key messages

This study is an in-depth examination of the care of older people as practiced in a large urban multidisciplinary medical centre. In particular it examines the relationship between GPs and AHPs, in the context of the management of older people with complex health care needs, and the impact of AHP care on the care of older people.

Comprehensive care of older people with complex needs is facilitated by thorough assessment from both a medical and nursing perspective, appropriate and timely referral to AHPs and high quality communication between all team members, including AHPs. Optimal and successful multidisciplinary care for older people with complex needs was achieved using a case management approach where the case manager is a highly trained health professional employed within the centre.

Allied health care delivered to this group of older people is compromised by suboptimal understanding of the role AHPs play by GPs and older people.

Inadequate numbers of Medicare subsidised AHP services place significant limitations on the quality of care AHPs can provide to people with complex needs. They have to choose between offering limited care within the numbers of Medicare subsidised visits allocated to them, or adhere to best practice care, and impose out of pocket costs on the older person. Better targeting of Medicare benefits to complex cases would allow more realistic numbers of subsidised services.

There are advantages of having relevant AHPs co-located within the practice. However this is not essential provided that there are processes that facilitate quality and timely communication with external providers.

Sophisticated practice management is required to facilitate incorporation of AHPs into a primary health care centre, and facilitate high quality case management and care coordination. Such management practices should be strongly encouraged in Australian General Practice. Such practice improvements could be facilitated by Medicare Locals.