



Tsunami of health concern on way

Many older people are swamping state services, each with four or five major complaints, writes Jill Penggelley.

A WAVE of elderly patients with multiple health problems is swamping health services which could be better prepared, an Adelaide researcher says.

UniSA Professor Andy Gilbert is in his final year of a five-year study of the care of older people with multiple chronic conditions.

The average Australian aged in their 60s or 70s is managing up to four chronic health conditions.

These can include heart problems, diabetes, arthritis, gut problems, osteoporosis and cancer.

By their 80s, they may have five or six ongoing health problems.

"Our whole health system is simply not geared for people with multiple chronic health problems," Prof Gilbert says.

"There's this kind of tsunami coming through.

"People are enjoying quality of life for much longer but we have to regear the system because we've got this huge number of people coming through with three, four or five complications."

Prof Gilbert says GPs often only manage the presenting problem during a short consult and this means other issues can get overlooked.

This increases the chances a drug will be prescribed which might cause complications with a patient's other medications.

Other issues include potential for communication problems between hospital and community care and inconvenience of getting to

appointments.

Prof Gilbert says the elderly can lose two days a week while "running after health problems".

"Consumers are really asking for much better-co-ordinated and co-located health services," he says.

"The Government's reform agenda is talking about these GP Super Clinics, which to me is right on the mark."

He says some doctors have expressed opposition to the clinics but many consumers welcome the change. "The flow-on of not doing that is these complex patients are huge users of emergency departments in hospitals," he says.

Prof Gilbert is the director of the Quality Use of Medicines and Pharmacy Research Centre at UniSA's Sansom Institute.

His \$2 million study has been funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Research Council to develop strategies for managing the health of older Australians.

He says he received "great engagement" from government and community groups at a recent briefing on the research.

SA Health acting executive director, Operations Division, Derek Wright, says SA has a range of primary health-care initiatives which also are aimed at prevention of chronic diseases.

"GP Plus Clinics and GP Super Clinics will enable elderly people with multiple chronic conditions to access a range of services in one location and closer to their homes," he says. "Geriatric management and evaluations units have been established at Modbury, the Queen Elizabeth, the Repatriation and Noarlunga hospitals, to help treat older people with multiple illnesses and disability when they present at hospital."»»

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