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Palliative Care Research: Past, Present and Future

Research is intrinsic to improving the quality of care that is offered to people at the end of life.

The last decade has seen rapid progress in the breadth of research which is being directed specifically to improving care at the end of life. Within Australia, specific projects to improve research capacity have been successful. Internationally the number of countries where there are active research programs in hospice and palliative care continues to increase. The evidence base that we bring to 2011 is strong as a result of that.

At the moment, a wide range of research programs are underway that include: basic science, rigorously designed, adequately powered clinical studies; population based studies; and health systems delivery studies. Australia is contributing strongly on the international platform in most of these areas.

The challenge for the next 10 years is to move to the next level of granularity in research. For example, the question will change from ”Can we improve breathlessness with pharmacological interventions?” to “What is the best pharmacological treatment for the breathlessness generated by interstitial lung disease?” This will allow a much more personalised approach to symptom control in key areas.

Funders are asked to make difficult decisions about research allocation. There is therefore a need to rapidly expand health service research as a key focus in the years ahead.