



Dr Tim Henwood and Dr Tuire Karaharju-Huisman at the 2024 ACCPA National Conference.

The value of rehabilitation and reablement

More functional independence and less pressure on health services is a win-win

Eighteen months ago, I sat with a group of fellow physiotherapists as we discussed the impact of the AN-ACC funding and the opportunity for improved care given the new model's focus on a client-centred approach, but our vision of best-practice care has not been delivered.

In fact, a survey by Allied Health Professionals Australia (AHPA) in 2023 found that many allied health practitioners have had a change in their work since introduction of AN-ACC, reporting reduced hours and lost roles.

More than half of the respondents to the survey reported a significant decrease in the services provided, which has impacted both the allied health professionals and their passion for aged care, as well as the residents who have been negatively impacted, particularly in relation to the increased rates of falls and pain levels.

Indeed, most of the respondents expressed great concern for the future of allied health in residential care, associated with decreased quality of care, as well as safety of residents.

With the data available, and the many reports in the media on the consequences of reduced rehabilitative services, I thought that it was worthwhile to revisit the topic of allied health and its importance.

During the 2024 ACCPA National Conference, I sat down with an old friend of nearly twenty years, Dr Tim Henwood, an exercise physiologist and principal consultant at AgeFIT Solutions, who is also a passionate advocate for allied health services in all areas of aged care.

Tim summarises the issues clearly, saying, "Aged care providers continue to facilitate low participation, prioritising care (domestic and personal) over allied health, which means wellbeing and independence tend to decline.

“In residential aged care, the move to AN-ACC has meant providers have halved their allied health commitment, negatively impacting client pain, falls and mobility.”

When looking to the future, Tim sees allied health and exercise therapies as a necessity. “Allied health and exercise therapies are the only effective countermeasures to physical decline and loss of independence,” he said.

“When delivered under an evidence-based framework, a multidisciplinary allied health approach can not only restore a client to functional independence, but can reduce health service utilisation, social disengagement and mental health decline.”

In September 2024, the Australian government released information about further aged care reform with a focus on the new Support at Home program, helping people to retain their independence and remain in their homes as they age, with an investment of \$5.6 billion in a reform package.

The new Support at Home package has outlined three items or funding: ‘clinical care’ (e.g. allied health, nursing care and restorative care), ‘independence’ (e.g. help with showering, getting dressed or taking medications), and ‘everyday living’ (e.g. cleaning, gardening, shopping or meal preparation).

While we celebrate that allied health and restorative care services are a priority service for the government, with the

aim to fully fund this service, we also need providers to have incentives for their delivery.

Providers must understand that with no new residential aged care beds on the horizon, an increasing number of low functioning older adults will remain living in the community with increasing care needs. Without an appropriate reablement plan, providers will undoubtedly experience increasing poor health among their community clients, further fuelling aged care staff shortages and stress.

“With the strengthening of the Aged Care Quality Standards to reinforce the importance of consumer independence, reablement, physical and mental wellbeing, and evidence-based practice, all providers must adopt allied health and therapy models of care,” Tim concludes.

The new age care reform brings in an opportunity to finally fulfill a vision for a world-class aged care system for Australia. If all providers engage allied health professionals in providing patient-centred, evidence-based, best-practice services, together we can enhance quality of life for every older person who accesses aged care.

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