

HEALTH REPORT

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CARER CRISIS TO SPIRAL IN NEXT TWENTY YEARS

New research shows that the number of Australians involved in caring for a loved one with a disability or illness is set to explode in the next 20 years.

A national study conducted for independent national peak body Carers Australia and healthcare company Pfizer Australia shows that one-in-every two adults expects to become a carer in the future.

"What many future carers do not realise is just how big an impact this will have on their quality of life and their health," says Louise Gilmore, President of Carers Australia.

The study is published in the latest issue of the Pfizer Australia Health Report and suggests that these future carers will experience significant physical, emotional, social and financial challenges.

The national poll found that more than two-thirds of Australia's current carers feel their role impacts on other relationships. One-in-three admits this impact is being felt "a great deal" or "quite a lot".

More than half say they receive little or no support from other family members or friends, and 58 percent feel that when it comes to caring they don't have a choice.

The Carers Australia - Pfizer Australia is the first national survey of its kind to be published in five years.

Carers Australia's Louise Gimore says that while many people find the carer role a rewarding and fulfilling experience, most also encounter a significant downside.

"Social isolation, lack of sleep, stress and physical and mental exhaustion are all typical downsides. This culminates in a significant impact on quality of life, not to mention higher rates of depression and other major health issues.

"My advice to the one-in-two Australians expecting to become a carer in the future is to get advice early and plan now, not later, to avoid the isolating effects of being a carer.

"As a nation, we need to urgently assess the level of assistance and support currently being provided to carers.

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HEALTH REPORT

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-2-

"The reality is that these people are underpinning our community services. Without them, either now or in the future, the health system would be unable to cope," said Ms Gilmore.

The research has also revealed the significant financial impact of caring. Nearly half of all carers are not working in paid employment. Another one-in-five works part-time.

Of those in full or part-time employment, more than a third admit they have had to take time off work as a result of their caring responsibilities.

"Carers do make a significant yet often invisible contribution to the Australian economy but always at their own expense. We need to focus on helping carers perform their vital role into the future," commented Ms Gilmore.

The good news is that the research revealed a high level of understanding for carers in the community. Of those that work, half report employers being flexible when it comes to their caring duties.

Two-thirds of all carers say that in treating the person they care for, GPs and other primary healthcare professionals do consider their needs and capacity to care.

"Understanding is an important first step in acknowledging the needs of the carer. But carers also need respite and support services and adequate income support.

"This research has provided a significant insight into how carers are being affected on a daily basis. Now we need to employ the trends detected to help shape planning and public policy into the future," Ms Gilmore added.

To support carers, Carers Australia has joined with Pfizer to produce this month's edition of the Pfizer Australia Health Report. Filled with useful information, free copies can be requested by phoning 1800 675 229 or by visiting www.healthreport.com.au where carers can also sign-up for email alerts of future editions.

The findings on Australian attitudes towards carers are based on responses from 1,421 people aged 18 and over. The research was conducted in March 2004 by independent consultants Stollznow Research.

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NB: INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS OR CARERS ARE AVAILABLE IN EACH STATE.

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