It’s critical that residential aged care is equipped to care for the old and dying, but insufficient resources and workforce issues add to the challenge, writes Deborah Parker.

Australians, like many developed countries, has an ageing population that is becoming increasingly dependent on formalised systems of care. A greater number of older Australians are using aged care services; in 2010-11, 75 per cent of all people dying had used an aged care service in their last year of life compared to 70 per cent in 2003-04.

Residential aged care facilities provide 24-hour care to 7.6 per cent of the Australian population aged 65 and over, with 83 per cent requiring high level care. Time from admission to death for many developed Australia, like other developed countries, is constrained by a resource-constrained environment and for some services with limitations on staff numbers and access to appropriately skilled staff.

PALLIATIVE CARE

Source of support

A final response of 131 respondents, or a response rate of 61 per cent, was achieved. The majority of services were based in NSW (33 per cent) or Victoria (26 per cent). Almost half of respondents worked in major cities.

While almost 13 per cent of services did not provide any specific support to residential aged care facilities, the remainder identified that the most common services were advice by telephone (74 per cent), on-site palliative care assessment (70 per cent), medication advice (64 per cent), education (67 per cent), psychosocial support (56 per cent), advance care planning (56 per cent), medical advice (48 per cent), nursing services (43 per cent) and bereavement support (43 per cent). Over 90 per cent of specialist palliative care services delivered education in palliative care at the local level and just over half of services delivered education in advance care planning.

INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES

However, almost 60 per cent of specialist palliative care services felt they did not have sufficient resources to meet the needs of current clients and three quarters of felt they did not have sufficient resources to meet the needs of potential clients in their area. Over 60 per cent of specialist palliative care services reported insufficient provision of social workers, other allied health workers (61 per cent) and bereavement services (56 per cent) as major gaps.

Some of the major gaps were identified in the recognition that palliative care is a focus on up-skilling the residential aged care workforce in advance care planning and palliative care, and linking this sector to specialist palliative care support and advice.

In western Australia, the Decision Assist phone line advisory service can provide you with support for advance care planning and palliative care advice. Other information on education and resources are available from the Decision Assist website.

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Through Decision Assist, there is a focus on up-skilling the residential aged care workforce in advance care planning and palliative care, and linking this sector to specialist palliative care support and advice.

One respondent indicated a need for specialist services in residential aged care. A further concern related to working with a transient workforce in outside services. Services also indicated that funding, additional equipment and resources would assist their work.

The results of this survey identified that specialist palliative care services in Australia are dedicated to providing support to residential aged care facilities. However, they do so under a resource-constrained environment and for some...