Urgent review of knee and back pain care needed to curb wasted health spending

Media Release: 21 September 2015

Arthritis Australia is calling for an urgent review of care arrangements for people with knee and back pain following a Four Corners report that millions of health dollars are being wasted on inappropriate care for people with these conditions.

“Excess imaging and over-reliance on surgery for people with knee and back pain costs consumers and the government millions of dollars which could be better spent on higher value healthcare,” said Ainslie Cahill, CEO of Arthritis Australia.

“For people with osteoarthritis of the knee this means providing better care earlier in the disease course rather than relying on pain killers and surgery alone,” she said.

“Most people with osteoarthritis don’t get the advice and support they need through the health system to manage their condition. Yet weight loss and exercise really help to decrease pain and slow disease progression, reducing demand for ineffective procedures such as arthroscopies and minimising the need for costly and traumatic joint replacement surgery.

“Joint replacements for osteoarthritis cost $2 billion a year and this expenditure is growing by $80m a year, Ms Cahill said. “While these procedures are very effective, most people on waiting lists for this surgery have never been offered non-surgical management options apart from pain killers, despite evidence that they work.”

At least 10% of people waiting for joint replacements who are offered individualised team-based care plans, including support for weight loss and exercise, decide they no longer need a joint replacement,” said Ms Cahill. “If this care was available to everyone with severe osteoarthritis, you could save more than $150 million a year.”

Ms Cahill said the benefits would extend beyond the health system. “Arthritis and back pain are the leading causes of disability in Australia, costing billions of dollars in Disability Support Pension payments and $14 billion in lost GDP. Much of this cost could be avoided by providing more appropriate, timely care for people with arthritis and back pain.”

“We spend over $6 billion a year on arthritis, back pain and related conditions in the health system but we know this money isn’t always wisely spent,” Ms Cahill said.

“We stand ready to talk to the Minister for Health about how more appropriate and cost-effective care can be provided for people with arthritis and back pain.

Further information: Franca Marine 0432 567 413