

Each year the *Australian Journal of Primary Health* devotes one issue to a special theme under the auspices of a guest editor. In 2006 the focus of the special issue will be on community-based care.

Since the 1960s the aspiration to community-based care has become increasingly important for users of services as well as policy-makers. The evolution of community-based care has been influenced by deep currents of change in Western societies. Technical developments in areas such as dialysis technology and pharmaceuticals have made some kinds of complex care in community settings feasible. The evolution of market-based service frameworks and the “consumer society” have strengthened arguments that services should adapt to consumer aspirations by providing more services in communities familiar to their users. In a similar vein the drive for efficiency in public service provision has motivated policy-makers to explore ways of reducing the cost of services whilst striving to maintain quality. The social justice argument has been fundamental to de-institutionalising people with complex needs.

Over decades we have seen major changes in services to people with disabilities, including closure of residential institutions and development of some community-based services. More recently we are seeing programs designed to reduce demand for expensive hospital-based services by diverting patients from emergency departments and hospital beds to general practice, community and home-based care. Consumer organisations have been demanding

better services in community settings. Preventive programs to reduce the demand for hospital beds from people with chronic illnesses have become more common.

The *Australian Journal of Primary Health* has a contribution to make to the debates occurring in the field of community-based care. The special issue is one of the ways we can do this.

Some of the key questions to be addressed include the following: how satisfactory is the current system of community-based care? How well do we understand complex and long-term client needs? How well is the service system able to deal with the complexity of the Australian community that has huge differences in needs between sub-populations? How well do legal institutions and policy frameworks support services providing community-based care? What have been the experiences of service providers with current models of community-based care? What have been the experiences of service users? Are there adequate functional links between the administrative sectors impacting on health, such as the courts and correctional services, housing, employment, social and health services? Are resources and infrastructure adequate to meet the demand for community-based care?

At the Journal we are looking forward to contributions from researchers, practitioners and policy people, to further discussion of community-based care in Australia.

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