

Stories of Change

Palliative care advanced skills post



A new Palliative Care Advanced Skills Post for Gippsland GP registrars has been tried and tested for the first time in the region by a Latrobe-Valley based doctor.

The palliative care post was the result of a collaboration between Eastern Victoria GP

Training (EVGPT), Monash Health and Latrobe Regional Health in a bid to strengthen palliative care GP skills and capacity in the region.

The Palliative Care Advanced Skills Post is funded as part of the Victorian Rural Generalist Program (VRGP) and will augment Gippsland's existing community palliative care service providers.

EVGPT Deputy Director of Medical Education & Training (Rural) Dr Liz Wearne said the introduction of the palliative care post was "a long time coming".

"I remember being involved in conversations at Latrobe Regional Hospital about 12 years ago about trying to set up this palliative care posting," Dr Wearne said.

"There was a bit of pushback in terms of 'well, do GPs actually belong in that space?', and I think over the years the need hasn't changed dramatically across the region, but what we've learnt is it's not getting any easier to recruit specialists in palliative care to Gippsland.

"It's not getting any easier to recruit specialists in palliative care to Gippsland."

- Dr Liz Wearne

"It really took having a couple of key champions at LRH and the involvement of Monash Health to really bring this together, and of course having the VRGP involved to push it along as well has been one of those lovely magical times where all the pieces have come together to advocate for this."

It is hoped the post will help arm GPs with the skills and experience necessary to provide palliative care for their patients and go some way to addressing the shortage of end of life care options for communities across the region.

"What I would love to see is continuity of a GP training in the post so there is that person with a general practice expertise working in the hospital each year and providing a learning interface between the hospital and the community... and someone in the hospital that understands the particular challenges of working at the coalface in a community too," Dr Wearne said.

"I would hope that over time what we start to build is a group of GPs in Gippsland who have that specialist expertise and they can then start to educate their GP peers and put systems in place in their practices that are more responsive to patients with palliative care needs.

"We can't ignore anymore that GPs do a lot of this (palliative care) work in their communities and they need to be skilled and resourced to do that. If we start to build some local champions, some local GPs who are willing to lead their peers, that will really help.

"Having more GPs out amongst the community who can do this sort of work increases choice for patients. They're not just looking at dying in hospices or hospitals or nursing homes; if they want to die at home then perhaps that can be possible for them."

Victorian Rural Generalist Program Gippsland Regional Coordinator Julie Rogalsky said the Palliative Care Advanced Skills Post was designed to strengthen the system by training doctors locally.

"It's about being assured you've got a well-trained doctor as well as a connection to a regional or state-wide team that can support the patient and the family through their palliative phase," Dr Rogalsky said.

"It'll be great to have a network across all of Gippsland of rural generalists who have a specialist skill in palliative care. Then when they're back in a more rural community there is a resource for other doctors as well, so it's sort of a snowball effect, they can assist others, train registrars and get them all involved because at one stage or another they're all going to have patients that are in a palliative care."

Dr Damian Hannon, who was the first local GP to complete the palliative care post, was identified by EVGPT as a "terrific candidate" to pioneer the program.

"Palliative care is something I've been interested in ever since making an error as first year doctor. I was doing my rounds and left seeing my palliative care patient to last by the time I got to them they were in distress. My supervisor said to me after: "always see your palliative care patient first, they only get to die once'," Dr Hannon said.

"Working in palliative care has changed how I approach people with non-malignant diseases. Clinicians make the connection between cancer and palliative care well, but the other non-malignant chronic conditions tend to not get managed with a palliative care focus in mind. One of the best things I've learnt is how to manage those people better."

Dr Hannon urged other GPs and GP registrars to consider palliative care training. With more initiatives and funding focusing on end of life care he hopes to see substantive change to the system across Gippsland.

"We need more people doing this work because these patients have complex care needs and it is imperative that we can respond in a timely fashion to meet these needs as patients approach the end of their life," he said.



"People think this job is all doom and gloom, but actually it's often not. Being able to provide comfort to people at a really vulnerable time is a real honour and it strengthens you. If you're offered palliative care [training as a doctor], my advice would be to take it up early because it can vastly improve the remaining quality of time someone has left with their family.

"There is a real opportunity to see substantive change over the next 10 years in Latrobe."

- Dr Damian Hannon

"There is a real opportunity to see substantive change over the next 10 years in Latrobe and we just need to keep the pressure on the systems in place to make sure the funding comes in to back up the provision of services."