ENHANCING THE HEALTH OF INFORMAL CARERS:

IMPLICATIONS FOR GENERAL PRACTICE,
POLICY AND PUBLIC HEALTH
IN THE 21st CENTURY.

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ABSTRACT

'ENHANCING THE HEALTH OF CARERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR GENERAL PRACTICE, POLICY & PUBLIC HEALTH IN THE 21ST CENTURY'

This study examines four main areas: the impact of caring on the health of the informal carer; general practice as the key to carer health enhancement; and informal caregiving as population health and public policy issues under the wider rubric of public health.

3.4-4.2% of informal carers were caring for chronically ill, disabled or frail aged individuals during the past decade in South Australia, however this was at a personal cost to the health of at least a third of family carers. Despite provision of support services for carers, a clinical model of care for carers is absent from policy and care planning. Therefore proactive General Practitioners are vital for both the well being of the carer and the cared for person at home but GPs have needs too when trying to assist carers. Few carer studies have sought a GP perspective.

[Phase one]: The health and social needs of carers were examined in the general practice domain with 22 carers and 25 GPs [using focus groups, interviews and questionnaires] in the mid 1990s. [Phase two]: Population surveys of over 6000 people [using the SA Health Omnibus Survey] to compare health status between carers and non-carers were conducted in 1994 and 1998. Carers consistently had lower scores than non-carers in all health dimensions of the SF-36. Females' scores were lower than males, and up to a half of all carers reported their caring role negatively impacted on their physical and emotional health to the point where the individual's social and emotional functional capacity was significantly limited.

This research concludes that carers may actually be prevented from achieving their optimum health status due to the restrictions of their caring roles and lifestyles and therefore recommends specific carer health policies be developed. Future care planning, training curricula, and carer policy requires an ethical framework of caregiving to better address the individual health and clinical needs of the carer - in parallel to service needs associated with the caring role and relationship. Improved integration of general practice with all carer support and community care initiatives is urgently required.