

## Media Release

# MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS RISING AND ACCELERATING IN AUSTRALIA NEW DATA SHOWS

The number of Australians living with multiple sclerosis (MS) is increasing at a significant and accelerating rate.

The latest data showed that 33,335 Australians were living with MS in 2021, an increase of 30% (7,728) over the four years since the previous update in 2017 (25,607).

The increase of MS in Australia has more than doubled from the previous period, which identified an increase of 4,324 people over eight years from 2010 to 2017.

Consequently, the prevalence of MS in Australia has also risen considerably. In 2021, 131.12 Australians per 100,000 people lived with MS, up from 103.7 per 100,000 in 2017.

The latest MS figures were published in the interim report, Health Economic Impact of Multiple Sclerosis in Australia in 2021, commissioned by MS Australia and prepared by the Menzies Institute for Medical Research at the University of Tasmania.

Principal Research Fellow at the Menzies Institute for Medical Research and Clinical Neurologist at the Royal Hobart Hospital and one of the report authors, Professor Bruce Taylor, says that while the rise in prevalence is a concern, the results were not unexpected.

“Increasing MS numbers are not what any of us want to see, however, the data is consistent with what we have been witnessing both domestically and internationally.

“Many lifestyle and behavioural risk factors contribute to a person developing MS, including obesity and insufficient sunlight exposure.

“If we can narrow down more precisely what risk factors are driving this escalation through further research, we could significantly reduce the risk of MS in Australia and globally,” Professor Taylor said.

The Interim Report also examined the economic impact MS has on Australian society by looking at the per person costs and the total cost of illness.

In 2021, the annual per person cost of a person living with MS in Australia was \$73,457, an increase of \$5,075 from 2017.

The annual per person costs of MS in Australia are higher than other comparable complex chronic diseases such as Parkinson’s disease (\$53,318), Type 2 diabetes (\$5,209) and long-term cancer (\$17,401).

Head of the Health Economics Research Unit at Menzies and lead author of the report, Professor Andrew Palmer, says the total costs for all people with MS in Australia have increased substantially, from \$1.75 billion in 2017 to \$2.5 billion in 2021.

“The rising costs of MS in Australia are significant, reflecting the increasing number of people with the disease, as well as CPI increases,” Professor Palmer said.

“Due to the current climate of inflationary pressures, it is expected that MS cost estimates will continue to escalate even further from 2022 onwards.”

MS Australia CEO Rohan Greenland says the latest MS numbers were concerning, but believes it is clear what must be done to turn this around.

“The latest data shows an obvious urgent need for further government investment in MS research, so we can first put the brakes on this acceleration, and ultimately stop MS in its tracks,” Mr Greenland said.

MS Australia is also calling on the Australian Government for:

- Greater investment in MS research, particularly through the Medical Research Future Fund
- Regular data collection through the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- Better access to care including MS Nurses
- Better understanding of MS and other neurological conditions within the NDIS via a neurological advisory group
- Better investment in broader preventative health measures, including healthy weight, tobacco control, nutrition and physical activity, all of which contribute to brain health.

MS Australia is committed to working with the Australian Government to address these issues, as well as increasing investment in MS research, and working collaboratively with other MS organisations across the world to align and accelerate research that will lead us faster and further down the pathways to cures.

MS Australia will also commission further research into the reasons behind this sharp surge in prevalence.

Mr Greenland says people living with MS in Australia have good access to efficacious disease modifying therapies, which can be life-changing for people who are newly diagnosed but says with prevalence on the rise more must be done.

“A recent study found that MS prevalence had increased in every world region from 2013 to 2020, with a person diagnosed with MS every five minutes. Now we are seeing that same alarming trend in Australia and must act to both better understand what is driving this increase and to support everyone in our MS community,” Mr Greenland said.

To help curtail rising MS costs, MS Australia is also calling on the federal, state and territory governments to invest in the MS Nurse workforce.

Mr Greenland says specialised nurse care is also a highly cost-effective model of MS care, reducing the need for emergency visits, hospitalisations, and other more costly health professionals such as general practitioners and neurologists.

“Access to MS Nurses provides a better quality of life for a person with MS and significantly reduces the costs to our health system. MS Australia stands ready to work with governments across Australia on measures to increase the MS Nurse workforce,” Mr Greenland said.

MS Australia President, Associate Professor Des Graham, says it will take the full might of a global collaborative effort to get ahead of the escalating rates of MS across the world.

“MS Australia has joined forces with leading international MS organisations to share knowledge, resources and expertise to ensure we are throwing everything we’ve got to put MS behind us,” Associate Professor Graham said.

*MS Australia and Menziess Institute for Medical Research would like to thank the people with MS who participated in the Australian MS Longitudinal Study (AMSLS) surveys that informed this Interim Report and the dedicated AMSLS team.*

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#### **About MS**

MS is the most common acquired chronic neurological disease affecting young adults, often diagnosed between the ages of 20 to 40 and, in Australia, affects three times more women than men. As yet, there is no cure. There is no known single cause of MS, but many genetic and environmental factors have been shown to contribute to its development.

In MS, the body's own immune system mistakenly attacks and damages the fatty material – called myelin – around the nerves. Myelin is important for protecting and insulating nerves so that the electrical messages that the brain sends to the rest of the body, travel quickly and efficiently.

As the myelin breaks down during an MS attack – a process called demyelination – patches of nerves become exposed and then scarred, which renders the nerves unable to communicate messages properly and at risk of subsequent degeneration. This means that the brain cannot talk to other parts of the body, resulting in a range of symptoms that can include a loss of motor function (e.g., walking and hand and arm function, loss of sensation, pain, vision changes and changes to thinking and memory).

#### **About MS Australia**

MS Australia is Australia's national multiple sclerosis (MS) not-for-profit organisation that empowers researchers to identify ways to treat, prevent and cure MS, seeks sustained and systemic policy change via advocacy, and acts as the national champion for Australia's community of people affected by MS.

MS Australia represents and collaborates with its state and territory MS Member Organisations, people with MS, their carers, families and friends and various national and international bodies to:

- Fund, coordinate, educate and advocate for MS research as part of the worldwide effort to solve MS
- Provide the latest evidence-based information and resources
- Help meet the needs of people affected by MS.

### **About Menzies Institute for Medical Research**

Menzies exists to perform internationally significant medical research leading to healthier, longer and better lives for Tasmanians.