



Inquiry into the Use of School buses in Rural and Regional Victoria submission

Submission deadline: 25 June 2021

Introduction

Cancer Council Victoria and Heart Foundation are organisations dedicated to improving noncommunicable disease prevention and control. This submission aligns with our strategic priorities to save lives and enable healthier behaviours by respectively reducing the impact of cancer and heart disease. Accordingly, the submission focuses on the issues that may be experienced by rural and regional Victorians in accessing treatment and healthier behaviours.

About our submission

This submission responds to the following of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

- (1) an independent analysis of the transport disadvantages experienced by regional and rural Victorians, specifically youth, the elderly and low-income households
- (2) investigating the potential social and community impacts of improving mobility options by widening the mainstream school bus system and an analysis of the examples and trials from other jurisdictions

About Cancer Council Victoria

Cancer Council is a non-profit organisation that has been working for more than 80 years across every area of every cancer - from research and prevention to support and advocacy. Our mission is to prevent cancer, empower people and save lives. We provide support services and information resources for Victorians affected by cancer, including patients, their carers and family. Our 13 11 20 cancer information and support line is staffed by experienced cancer nurses who provide tailored informational, emotional and practical support to callers whose lives are affected by cancer and link them with a wider range of support programs.

About Heart Foundation

The Heart Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to fighting the single biggest killer of Australians – heart disease. For 60 years, we have led the battle to save lives and improve the heart health of all Australians.

We continue to lead the fight through funding research, developing treatment guidelines for health professionals, supporting patient care and helping Australians to live heart-healthy lifestyles, including through reducing modifiable risks of heart disease such as smoking, poor diet and physical inactivity.

Executive Summary

Cancer Council and the Heart Foundation recommend that issues related to accessing healthcare be considered in the inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria.

Given the Victorian Government's responsibility to provide all Victorians with access to healthcare, this is a unique opportunity to examine innovative solutions to deliver an efficient and accessible public transport system for people in rural and regional areas.

Victorians are well supported by a high-quality healthcare system, however we regularly hear that rural and regional Victorians face barriers to accessing optimal treatment due to limited transport options and prohibitive out of pocket costs.

Transportation barriers, can lead to missed appointments, delayed care, and missed or delayed medication use. This in turn can result in poorer health outcomes.¹ Improving public transport and financially supporting Victorian patients' use of transport, including the public transport system, can reduce transportation barriers to treatment.

Extending the public transport network in rural and regional areas, including using school buses to increase transport options, would assist patients access health services by either transporting them to local health services or to major transport hubs that connect to larger regional or metropolitan health services. This could be an economically viable addition to current services that supports local jobs and provides people with serious illness an affordable transport option, helping them stay close to personal and community networks.

Recommendation: Extend public transport networks across rural and regional Victoria

Cancer Council Victoria and the Heart Foundation support the concept of community driven solutions to improve equitable access to treatment and care for rural and regional Victorians. Specific communities will have specific needs, and novel solutions such as using school buses outside of school runs, could be one small but not insignificant transport option that could make a real difference to those who are most disadvantaged.

Recommendation: Review the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme

We know that costs associated with travel can be a barrier to regional Victorians accessing healthcare. We recommend a review of the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS) incorporating input from stakeholders and consideration of experiences in other jurisdictions, to identify complementary administrative and structural changes to overcome the barrier of cost in accessing healthcare.

¹ Samina T. Syed, Ben S. Gerber, and Lisa K. Shar, "Traveling towards Disease: Transportation Barriers to Health Care Access," *Journal of Community Health* 38, no. 5 (October 2013): 976–93, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-013-9681-1>

Transport disadvantages and access to healthcare

Using school buses, sitting idle for much of the day, as community patient transport is a creative solution that would benefit people living in rural and remote areas who face geographical barriers to accessing health care.²

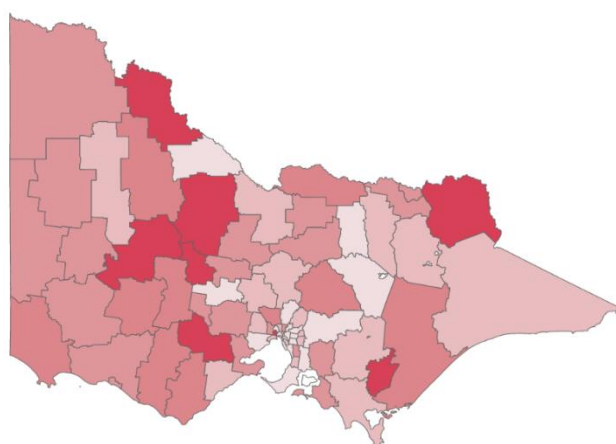
Significant numbers of Victorians must travel from regional and rural areas for treatment for serious illness. We know that 10% of patients coming to metropolitan hospitals during the diagnostic phase of their cancer care live outside the metro Melbourne area. We also know that patients receiving radiotherapy / chemotherapy may need daily appointments in metro Melbourne spanning weeks, months or years.³

People who live in rural and regional areas have poorer cancer outcomes. Overall, cancer survival rates are higher for residents of metropolitan Melbourne (70%) compared to the rest of Victoria (66%).⁴ It is more difficult for rural and regional patients to access treatment for chronic health conditions. A contributing factor is difficulty accessing public transport. Transportation barriers, including cost, can lead to missed appointments, delayed care, and missed or delayed medication use. This in turn can result in poorer health outcomes. In Cancer Council's public consultations to inform our submission to the Victorian Cancer Plan 2020-2024, lack of public transport was a recurrent issue mentioned by the community in regional areas such as Wangaratta.

The Heart Foundation's **Australian Heart Maps** online data shows regional and rural heart health outcomes are lower than metro Melbourne. For example, the hospitalisation rate for heart attack and coronary heart disease in the Shepparton region is around 70 per cent higher than the state's lowest region – Melbourne's inner east.

Coronary heart disease rates are also higher in regional areas than metro Melbourne:

Figure 1: Coronary heart disease rates by LGA



²AIHW, Rural and regional Health snapshot, 23 July 2020, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/rural-and-remote-health>

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019, Australian Demographic Statistics, Cat. no. 3101.0, <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0>, "Greater Melbourne (GCCSA)," Data by region, accessed January 28, 2020, <https://itt.abs.gov.au/itt/r.jsp?databyregion#/>.

⁴ Thursfield V. and Farrugia H, (2019) *Cancer in Victoria Statistics and Trends 2018*, Melbourne, CCV

On average, one person is admitted to hospital every nine minutes with a heart attack. Without proper management and access to services, heart attack survivors are at greater risk of having a second attack and dying.

Cancer Council and the Heart Foundation support initiatives to improve the availability of public transport for rural and regional Victorians as these measures can only reduce barriers and improve access to treatment.

We believe using school buses in rural and regional areas is a novel but practical transport option that could be explored. Community consultation would be essential and whilst not providing a stand-alone or long-term solution, it could address immediate unmet needs faced by people who have limited or no access to transport to specialist health services.

The cost of transport is a burden

Victorians in regional and rural areas experience financial disparity when diagnosed with a chronic disease. The hidden costs associated with parking, travel and accommodation for treatment is a frequently reported burden that impacts on psychosocial and financial wellbeing.

In considering changes to the public transport system, Cancer Council and the Heart Foundation would like to highlight the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS). VPTAS subsidises the transport and accommodation costs incurred by rural Victorians – and, if appropriate, their carers – who have no option but to travel a long distance to receive medical specialist services.⁵

Given that the financial barriers to travelling for medical treatment affect a broad range of Victorians - not just those affected by cancer, Cancer Council has been working alongside the VPTAS Alliance for many years. Established in 2013, the VPTAS Alliance comprises more than 20 cancer, chronic disease and patient support agencies, all with a strong interest in supporting people who need to travel for treatment. The VPTAS Alliance is committed to seeking further improvements to the administration of scheme and improving community awareness of the support that the Victorian Government provides to regional and rural Victorians who need to travel for specialist medical treatment.

VPTAS was last reviewed in 2019 yet Victoria is lagging behind similar schemes in other jurisdictions as patients are required to pay up front for travel and accommodation leaving them with high out of pocket costs. Patients may defer treatment or seek alternative treatment options partially due to the financial burden of travel and accommodation costs.⁶ Lack of VPTAS eligibility for patients receiving clinical trials, is a significant obstacle to recruitment of rural and regional patients and adds to the disparity around who gets access to what may be life saving or life prolonging treatment.

⁵ Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS)," health.vic, Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria), accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/hospitals-and-health-services/rural-health/vptas-how-to-apply>

⁶ Consumers Health Forum of Australia, *Out of Pocket Pain*

We continue to hear distressing cases which highlight the inability of VPTAS to address the difficulties in accessing treatment experienced by rural and regional Victorians affected by chronic disease, such as Ted whose closest treating centre is in Warrnambool – 97.1 kilometres from his home in Portland. Ted was told repeatedly that he was ineligible for critical financial assistance by just 2.9 kilometres. After contacting the Health Minister’s office Ted was advised that he was eligible for special type of “block funding” at a reduced rate:

“It doesn’t matter if we’re 100 kilometres away or 50 kilometres away, we should all be entitled to the same help from the government and access to the best possible treatment,” said Ted. “We should all get a fair deal.” Ted’s treatment plan involves receiving 39 days of radiation therapy, which is administered consecutively for five days at a time, followed by a mandatory break over the weekend. Ted says VPTAS should be like workcover and cover all travel expenses “The block funding is only \$200 a week and that doesn’t cover much, it is difficult to pay the rest on a pension.”

We see opportunities to alleviate some hardship through reducing the complexity of the application process and the need to pay upfront and wait for the subsidy after the event, which would bring Victoria into line with other states. Changes to VPTAS could make a meaningful difference for people affected by chronic health conditions and address some of the disparities in outcomes for people living in regional and rural Victoria.

Health benefits of improved public transport networks

Physical activity is important for good health and wellbeing and can help to prevent some cancers and a range of chronic diseases including heart disease.⁷ Physical inactivity has been found to contribute to 21.2% of the burden of disease for cardiovascular disease, 29.7% for endocrine disorders and 6.4% for cancer in Australia.⁸

The design of the built environment – including public transport access – can support us all to be more active if there are opportunities to walk, cycle, take public transport, engage in open spaces for recreation or sport, and interact with others.

The WHO Global Action Plan on Physical Activity, released in June 2018, highlights the creation of Active Environments as a key action to reduce physical inactivity.⁹

Evidence published in *The Lancet* quantifies the health gains that could be achieved if cities incentivised a shift to active environments. In the case of Melbourne, implementing changes that made the city more conducive to walking, cycling and public transport could reduce the burden of heart disease by 19%.¹⁰

A further benefit of active transport is the climate and health link given replacing car trips with active travel, like walking, cycling or catching public transport cuts emissions and air pollution.¹¹

Government can assist by funding public transport and pedestrian infrastructure. Our COVID-19 recovery should include facilitating people being physically active again, such as by building safe, accessible and wide footpaths as well as safe cycling networks.

Having access to transport options (like public transport, walking and cycling) are key features which help promote equity, and by extension, support quality of life for disadvantaged populations, older Victorians and children, those in outer growth areas, and remote and regional Australians.

⁷ World Health Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization. *Diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases*. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO; 2003. Report No.: WHO technical report series 916. Available from: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/42665/1/WHO_TRS_916.pdf

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2016). Australian Burden of Disease Study: Impact and Causes of Illness and Death in Australia 2011. Canberra, p59

⁹World Health Organization, Global action plan on physical activity 2018–2030: more active people for a healthier world, 2018.

¹⁰ Stevenson, M., et al., Land use, transport, and population health: estimating the health benefits of compact cities. *The Lancet*, 2016. 388(10062): p. 2925-2935.

¹¹ , Hosking, J., Mudu, P., & Dora, C. (2011). *Health co-benefits of climate change mitigation – Transport sector*. World Health Organisation, Geneva. Retrieved from

http://extranet.who.int/iris/restricted/bitstream/handle/10665/70913/9789241502917_eng.pdf;jsessionid=1A582240E2144DB6EB58B1CCB5412446?sequence=1

Recommendations

Cancer Council Victoria and the Heart Foundation make the following recommendations to address current public transport system inadequacies for patients, their families and carers.

Recommendation: Extend public transport networks across rural and regional Victoria

Cancer Council Victoria and the Heart Foundation support the concept of community driven solutions to improve equitable access to treatment and care for rural and regional Victorians. Patients and carers who our organisations support, advise us that current public transport networks across rural and regional Victoria can pose significant barriers to optimal care. Specific communities will have specific needs, and practical solutions such as using school buses outside of school runs, could be one small but not insignificant transport option that could make a real difference to those who are most disadvantaged.

Recommendation: Review the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme

A consultative review incorporating input from stakeholders and consideration of experiences in other jurisdictions should explore improvements to administrative processes as well as a review of subsidy rates, eligibility criteria and promotion strategies.

Summary

Cancer Council and the Heart Foundation support initiatives to improve the availability of public transport for rural and regional Victorians as these measures can only reduce barriers and improve access to treatment and care for rural and regional Victorians.

Cancer Council Victoria and the Heart Foundation invites the Inquiry into the Use of School buses in Rural and Regional Victoria submission to consider our recommendations for the inclusion of consultation to identify local solutions to improving access to treatment and care for rural and regional Victorians.

With so many Victorians affected by cancer and heart disease, ensuring access to treatment and care is imperative to their survival and health outcomes.

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Thank you for your consideration of this submission.

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