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MEDIA RELEASE

Patients to suffer from cuts to medical research

The Federal Government's proposed budget cuts to medical research will jeopardise the health and wellbeing of the thousands of Australians living with incurable and debilitating bowel diseases, a health charity says.

Crohn's & Colitis Australia (CCA) says funding cuts would prevent much-needed advancements in medical treatment for the 61,000 Australians living with Crohn's disease and colitis, which cause fatigue, extreme weight loss, severe abdominal cramps, the urgent and frequent need to use the toilet, and often require surgery.

It is believed the Gillard Government plans to slash \$400million from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) budget.

"Our members already feel marginalised and ignored by the health funding system, with just 0.1 per cent of health funding currently being spent on these diseases," CCA chief executive Francesca Manglaviti said.

"Any further cuts to research could effectively mean there won't be any Australian research into these conditions, and our members will be extremely angry about this.

"Past Australian research in this area has been crucial in identifying the genetic aspect of Crohn's and colitis, which enables testing for susceptibility to be done before the disease has progressed and is so much harder and more expensive to treat.

"Research has also led to the discovery of biologic treatments that can revolutionise patients' wellbeing and quality of life, enabling them to get back into the workforce, or to get back to school. Unfortunately, these don't work for everyone so research into other treatments must continue, as well as research aimed at finding a cure.

"CCA's research shows that these diseases are predicted to rise by 23 per cent by 2020. Crohn's and colitis are not preventable so the Government should be looking to minimise the eventual cost to health system by investing in research to keep people out of hospital."

A 2007 Access Economics report found Crohn's and colitis (collectively known as inflammatory bowel disease or IBD) cost the nation \$2.7billion a year in lost productivity, health-care costs, informal care, and patients' lost wellbeing.

“We acknowledge that there are many causes pulling at the Government’s purse strings, but cutting costs to medical research, and particularly in the area of chronic illnesses, does not make long-term financial sense,” Ms Manglaviti said.

CCA members are being encouraged to raise the issue with their parliamentary representative.

The charity’s concerns are backed by the Australian Inflammatory Bowel Disease Association (AIBDA), comprising leading gastroenterologists who undertake research into the debilitating conditions.

AIBDA president Dr Jane Andrews said the projected cuts would adversely affect researchers and their patients.

“This has very direct negative consequences for patient care, which can be particularly problematic in an uncommon chronic disease like IBD,” Dr Andrews said.

She said cutting medical research funding would lead to “falling standards in clinical care of IBD patients”, with researchers taking up posts overseas where research is more highly valued. Patients would also suffer by limited access to clinical trials and new drugs.

“Given our current record for excellence in IBD care and research in Australia, this would be a tragedy for us as clinicians, but even worse for our patients,” Dr Andrews said.

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For further comment contact CCA chief executive Francesca Manglaviti, 03 9815 1266.

About Crohn’s & Colitis Australia™ (CCA)

- CCA is a registered not-for-profit national organisation funded entirely through membership fees, donations and fundraising activities.
- CCA does not receive any federal or state government funding.
- CCA is the peak body representing Australians living with Crohn’s disease and colitis.
- CCA’s mission is to support the Crohn’s and colitis community with a focus on confidential support programs, including education, advocacy, counselling, increasing awareness and generating and utilising funds for research and programs.
- CCA’s Helpline receives more than 1000 calls a year.
- More than 2000 people attend CCA’s information forums, symposiums and camps around Australia every year.
- For more information visit www.crohnsandcolitis.com.au or phone 1800 138 029.