END OF LIFE CARE

The Australian Government recognises that Australians want to have choice and control over how and where they receive end of life care and support.

The need for end of life care can touch us at any age – not just old age, and Australians want to be reassured that if they are terminally ill they will be able to choose where they die. They also want to be reassured that they will receive high quality care in accordance with their health care preferences at the end of their lives.

End of life care and advance care planning are becoming increasingly important as the demand for palliative care, and the need for an appropriately skilled palliative care workforce, grows as a result of Australia’s ageing population.

Since 2009-10, the Australian Government has committed more than $2.1 billion in funding through two National Partnership Agreements to states and territories for the delivery of new sub-acute care, including palliative care, beds and equivalent services in the community.

In addition, since 2007, the Australian Government has funded a range of national palliative care projects through the National Palliative Care Program. These projects have primarily focused on education, training and quality improvement.

They include research into the safety and efficacy of medicines for palliative care use; promoting undergraduate and ongoing training in the care of dying people; supporting improved palliative care service delivery through outcome and process-based quality improvement projects; and facilitating the sharing of palliative care research, information and resources.

The Australian Government also provides subsidies for palliative care medicines under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and palliative care consultations under the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

As part of the Living Longer Living Better aged care reform package, the Government is investing $19.8 million over five years from 2012-13 to establish specialist palliative care and advance care planning advisory services for aged care providers and GPs caring for clients of aged care services. Grant applications are currently being sought to deliver the advisory services which are expected to begin in 2013-14.

Under this package, the Government is also investing $1.9 million over five years to expand the existing Program of Experience in the Palliative Approach to provide palliative care training for staff in residential aged care facilities and Home Care package services.
Around 110,000 people each year need some form of end of life care. More than half of all deaths occur in hospitals, yet most Australians would prefer to die in their own homes.

This suggests that many people do not get their wish in terms of where they spend their final days. It can be a difficult conversation for patients, families and health professionals alike, but having patient intentions clearly expressed in an advance care plan will make it easier for their wishes to be met.

From 2013-14, the Government is investing $10 million to enable Advance Care Directives to be stored on the Personally Controlled Electronic Health Record (PCEHR) – making it easier to tell your loved ones how you wish to be cared for as you get close to the end of your life.

This and the development of Advanced Care Directives will mean people will be able to share their end of life plans with any of their chosen doctors, hospitals, family and carers.

Because it is online, the advance care plan will be easily available to authorised health professionals. For example, if an elderly man from the Gold Coast is admitted to a hospital while visiting his family in Melbourne, his treating doctors and nurses would have access to information about his end of life care wishes – including any treatments he does or does not want under particular circumstances.

In 2013-14, the Australian Government is also providing an additional $800,000 over two years for the evidence-based Respecting Patient Choices advance care planning project. This is aimed at developing nationally consistent advance care planning practice guidelines, expanding advance care planning in general practice and contributing to the development of advance care directives for PCEHRs.

The Tasmanian Health Assistance Package includes more than $63 million for three palliative care projects to inform further work across the nation. These are:

- $51 million over four years to deliver multi-disciplinary, home-based palliative care services for people in Tasmania;
- $11 million over four years to support the rollout of electronic advance care planning across residential aged care facilities in Tasmania, building on the work of the Cradle Coast e-Health site. This funding also provides for some work towards the national template that will make advance care plans available in the PCEHR; and
- $1.2 million over four years to enhance skills and capabilities in delivering palliative care.

The services and training under this package will be rolled out from 2013-14.