

# Chief Medical Officer

Dear Prescriber

In Australia, over 180,000 people are living in residential aged care. Of these, more than half are living with dementia. As a primary health care practitioner who is providing care to residents of a residential aged care home, you play a critical role to help optimise the health and well-being of your patients.

There has recently been heightened concern over the use of psychotropic medications such as antipsychotics and benzodiazepines to manage the behaviours and psychological symptoms of dementia for people living in residential aged care homes. This has been reinforced by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. I am writing to bring your attention to information and resources about appropriate management of dementia symptoms.

Prescribing antipsychotic and benzodiazepine medications is clinically appropriate in treating pre-existing mental illness and some symptoms of dementia. For example, antipsychotics can be effective in treating psychotic symptoms of dementia such as delusions or hallucinations, while benzodiazepines may be clinically appropriate for the short term treatment of severe anxiety. In both circumstances, medications should be trialled for specific symptoms with the aim of reducing and ceasing medications as soon as possible. A small number of people may need such medication longer term.

These medications do not address many behaviours of dementia, such as inappropriate verbalisation, intrusive behaviours or so-called ‘wandering’. Furthermore, evidence suggests that for many people with dementia, these medications may cause harm. Their sedative effects can lead to an increased risk of falls and fractures, increased confusion, loss of independent function, weight loss and loss of ability to interact meaningfully with others, and to partake in pleasurable activities, and may result in a slowing of movements and increased muscle rigidity. Antipsychotic medications are also associated with increased risk of respiratory complications, stroke, heart rhythm abnormalities and death.

You would be aware that best practice for managing the behaviours and psychological symptoms of dementia uses a person-centred approach. Psychotropic medications are not first line therapy and should only be considered when person‑centred approaches have been maximised and an older person remains distressed, and then only with informed consent of the person or their representative. Person-centred approaches for which there is evidence of effectiveness include massage and touch, music, exercise and gardening, noting the need to tailor any measures to what is meaningful and preferred by the person living with dementia. The enclosed factsheet is useful to guide safe prescribing for your patients in a residential aged care home.

Further resources on behaviours that do not respond to medications, the side effects of antipsychotics and the management of the behaviours and psychological symptoms of dementia are available at [www.health.gov.au/psychotropic-use-RAC](http://www.health.gov.au/psychotropic-use-RAC) in relation to this topic.

The Australian Government funds a range of services to provide support in effectively managing the behaviours and symptoms of dementia through person-centred approaches, including Dementia Support Australia[[1]](#footnote-1) who can partner with you or a person’s care worker. The Dementia Training Program[[2]](#footnote-2) has free online training for nurses, GPs, allied health professionals and aged care workers on a range of topics such as diagnosing and managing dementia, management of antipsychotic medication and behaviour support.

Please know that we are also working with aged care providers, pharmacists and families to reduce usage of psychotropic medications and to maximise person-centred care approaches.

In early 2020, I will be sending letters to some prescribers to provide information and data to assist them to reflect on their prescribing patterns of antipsychotics and benzodiazepines to their patients living in residential aged care homes.

I thank you for your commitment to providing quality care for older Australians in residential aged care.

Yours sincerely

Professor Brendan Murphy

Chief Medical Officer

6 December 2019

1. Dementia Support Australia – 1800 699 799 or <https://dementia.com.au/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dementia Training Program – <https://www.dta.com.au/online-dementia-courses/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)