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National report shines light on epilepsy in Australia

UNDER EMBARGO—until 12.01AM, THURSDAY, 24 MARCH, 2022

Epilepsy affects around 151,000 Australians and thousands are hospitalised by their condition each year, according to the first comprehensive report, *Epilepsy in Australia*, from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).

'Epilepsy is a chronic neurological disorder characterised by recurrent seizures caused by a temporary disruption of the brain's electrical activity. Epilepsy does not refer to a singular condition, but rather represents a diverse range of disorders involving many seizure types,' said AIHW spokesperson Dr. Fleur de Crespigny.

'A diagnosis of epilepsy brings with it lifelong management, and many experience difficulties in their work, education and long-term health.'

According to the most recently analysed data, there were more than 31,000 hospital admissions associated with epilepsy in 2018–19, two-thirds of which recorded epilepsy as the primary reason for admission.

Additionally, there were over 20,700 epilepsy-related emergency department presentations in 2018–19, with over half of these presentations requiring admission to hospital.

'The majority of epilepsy-related emergency department presentations were triaged as urgent (seen within 30 minutes). A small proportion of presentations required resuscitation.'

'Rates of hospitalisations were 1.3 times higher in very remote areas compared with major cities and 1.8 times higher among those living in the lowest socioeconomic areas compared with those living in the highest,' said Dr. de Crespigny.

While around 7 in 10 people become seizure free with antiepileptic medications, 3 in 10 do not find an effective or suitable pharmaceutical treatment and may require surgical interventions.

There were around 3.1 million prescriptions dispensed for antiepileptic medications in 2019–20, with *Valproate* (24%) and *Levetiracetam* (22%) accounting for almost half of filled prescriptions. In 2018–19, around 450 epilepsy-related surgical procedures were performed.

Of the \$134 billion in national health service expenditure that could be attributed to specific disease groups in 2018–19, epilepsy accounted for around \$333 million, or 0.2% of this expenditure. Spending on epilepsy peaked at over \$22 million in the 50–54 age group and was generally higher for males than for females across most age groups.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were twice as likely as non-Indigenous people to have epilepsy and 3.5 times as likely to have an epilepsy-related hospitalisation.

Dr. de Crespigny noted that approximately half of all people with epilepsy also experience other physical or psychiatric conditions, often leading to poorer health outcomes, increased health care needs, decreased quality of life and greater social exclusion.

Media enquiries: Elise Guy, AIHW: 0468 525 418

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