Decision Assist – innovating national specialist palliative care and advance care planning advisory services for aged care providers and primary health care

LINDA NOLTE1, DEBORAH PARKER2, JENNIFER TIEMAN3, PATSY YATES3, LIZ CALLAGHAN4, KAY RICHARDS5, MELISSA CENTOFANTI6, KAREN DETERING1,2

1 ADVANCE CARE PLANNING AUSTRALIA, AUSTIN HEALTH, MELBOURNE, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA
2 DECISION ASSIST, AUSTIN HEALTH, MELBOURNE, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA
3 QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY, BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA
4 CARESEARCH, FLINDERS UNIVERSITY, ADELAIDE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA, AUSTRALIA
5 UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA
6 UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY, SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA
7 UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA
8 AGED AND COMMUNITY SERVICES AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA, AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY, AUSTRALIA

Background
During 2013-17, the Australia Commonwealth funded the national Specialist Palliative Care and Advance Care Planning Advisory Service program known as Decision Assist. The program was established to enhance national provision of specialist palliative care and advance care planning advisory services to recipients of aged care services as part of the Living Longer, Living Better aged care reform package.

The program established an expert consortium including Advance Care Planning Australia (based at Austin Health), Queensland University of Technology, Palliative Care Australia, CareSearch, University of Queensland, Australian and New Zealand Society of Palliative Medicine, Leading Age Services Australia, and Aged and Community Services Australia. The consortium comprised leaders in sector engagement, evidence review, transitional and implementation research, curriculum and education, and dissemination of findings.

Objectives
The primary objectives of Decision Assist were to:

- Provide specialist palliative care and advance care planning advice to aged care providers and General Practitioners caring for recipients of aged care services in all states and territories.
- Improve linkages between aged care services and palliative care services.
- Improve palliative care skills and advance care planning expertise of aged care staff and GPs caring for recipients of aged care services.
- Improve the quality of care for aged care recipients, prevent unnecessary hospital admissions and shorten hospital stays.

Method
National program governance was established and included performance reporting to the Australian Government. The program involved eight projects:

1. Specialist palliative care and advance care planning telephone advisory service.
3. Guidance and technology innovation.
4. GP training and resources for palliative care.
5. GP training and resources for advance care planning.
6. Aged care training and resources.
7. Linkages projects.

Project advisory committees were established to ensure involvement of the sector, expert opinion, monitoring of performance and delivery of innovative projects.

Results
During the 2013-16 reporting period, Decision Assist delivered a range of initiatives to the Australian palliative care, aged care and general practice workforce and sectors.

- Sector engagement resulted in:
  - 825 telephone advisory service enquiries for advance care planning and specialist palliative care advice.
  - Specialist palliative care enquiries were most commonly related to symptom management and/or advance care planning.
  - Decision Assist website, Facebook and Twitter accounts (139,000 website visits annually).
  - palliAGEDp and palliAGEDnurse apps developed to help care for people approaching end-of-life (3000+ downloads).
  - Palliative care training and resources delivered to 20% (n=4565) of GPs and 7% (n=723) of practice nurses nationally.
  - Advance care planning training and resources delivered to 2% of GPs (n=369), 1% of practice nurses (n=266) and 427 others including GP trainers and allied health.
  - Aged care training and resources delivered to 24% of all residential aged care facilities (n=652 facilities) in Australia and 7% of the total Home Care Package providers (n=1514 providers).
  - Twenty novel linkage projects implemented nationally, resulting in staff improvement of palliative care skills and advance care planning expertise.

Key findings
Decision Assist has demonstrated achievements against all of the program objectives and has met the three program outcomes of:

1. The empowerment of GPs and aged care providers with knowledge of ACP and palliative care.
2. The creation of links between aged care and palliative care.
3. The provision of advice about palliative care, advance care planning and Advance Care Directive resources, processes, legislation and accountabilities in the State or Territory in which the aged care provider or GP is located.

For those health professionals or aged care staff that participated in Decision Assist initiatives, there was a high level of satisfaction, increase in knowledge and confidence, and some clinical and organisational change. Improvements in clinical outcomes were evident for residents/clients and organisational changes indicate integration of advance care planning and palliative care.

Learnings and future directions
The Specialist Palliative Care and Advance Care Planning Advisory Service program continues to be funded by the Australian Government. For more information regarding the Decision Assist evaluation and learnings please see the evaluation report at www.decisionassist.org.au

Acknowledgements
Decision Assist is funded by the Australian Government. The Decision Assist program involves an expert consortium; past and current staff have contributed to the impact of the program.