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PATIENTS WITH MULTIPLE ILLNESSES NEED BETTER HEALTH CARE: STUDY

Australia's health system is failing the many people who suffer from multiple illnesses as it is principally designed to deal with individual conditions, a new study suggests.

The Serious and Continuing Illness Policy and Practice Study (SCIPPS) has found that patients with more than one serious illness and their carers struggle to manage on a day-to-day basis and often mistake one condition for the other.

One participant told a story about being rushed to the hospital after having an acid taste in her mouth while eating breakfast – at first she thought it was her reflux but it was actually the beginnings of a heart attack.

SCIPPS researcher Tanisha Jowsey, from the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI) at The Australian National University (ANU), said learning to recognise danger signs could be challenging with any chronic illness, but even harder with multiple illnesses.

“Getting it wrong could be deadly,” Ms Jowsey said.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare almost 80 per cent of the Australian population report having at least one long-term medical condition and more than 50 per cent of people aged 65 years and older have five or more chronic health conditions.

Ms Jowsey said despite evidence that most elderly people were managing multiple conditions Australia's health system was structured around providing care for individual illnesses.

The recently released National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission report hints at promoting patient-centred care. There is little information about what patient-centred care consists of but recognising that most people have more than one health condition and helping them manage their conditions would go some way towards achieving it.

“We need clearer guidelines about managing common combinations of illnesses, particularly when they have similar symptoms but different treatments,” she said.

“People with multiple illnesses and their carers need practical information and skills so they can make good decisions in complex situations and seek appropriate help from health professionals. Otherwise, they will continue to miss the warning signs of major health problems.”

The SCIPPS research was published this month in [Australia & New Zealand Health Policy](#). SCIPPS researchers are based at APHCRI, ANU Medical School and the Menzies Centre for Health Policy, a joint venture of ANU and the University of Sydney.

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