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Describing Oncology Social Work and Practice in Australia: What is the current “state of play”?

R. Pockett, **K. Hobbs**, M. Dzidowska, M. Peate

In cancer care, socially vulnerable groups and communities in Australia have higher mortality rates and poorer outcomes; including those with lower socioeconomic status, in rural and regional communities, in Indigenous communities and other marginalised social groups. Such groups traditionally make up the client mix for most social work services, and oncology social workers are usually the first port of call for psychosocial support in cancer care.

Although they are positioned to provide the “first line” of defence against psychological morbidity, there is an absence of peer-reviewed research addressing practice initiatives and interventions involving oncology social workers. The lack of registration for the Social Work profession in Australia compounds the problem of locating and defining the oncology social work workforce.

This paper will report preliminary findings from a PoCoG endorsed study, the aims of which are:

- 1) To describe the demographics, professional characteristics, and work settings of oncology social work clinicians in Australia.
- 2) To describe the self-reported practice domains in delivering social work services in a psycho-oncology setting.
- 3) To assess the group’s involvement in psycho-oncology research.
- 4) To describe the social workers’ barriers to provision of quality psycho-social care.

A survey was administered, with Social Workers accessed through PoCoG, OSWA and AASW mailing lists. A snowball recruitment method was adopted in order to maximise the sample size with the invitation requesting participants forward the survey to any eligible contacts.

Results describing the characteristics of the sample: work setting, self reported competency, access to training and professional development, involvement in research and barriers to provision of quality psychosocial care will be reported.

In documenting and defining the current “state of play” in Australian oncology social work practice and research, it is hoped that the outcomes of this project will inform further intervention research involving social workers.