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Government urged to fund early intervention programme for New Zealanders with osteoarthritis

Advocates for improved osteoarthritis (OA) care across Aotearoa New Zealand welcome the Ministry of Health's long-awaited Mobility Action Plan (MAP) programme evaluation report, which recommends an expanded rollout of the MAP as a cost-effective early intervention framework for New Zealanders with musculoskeletal conditions. The release of the report is especially important given how the Omicron variant of Covid-19 currently sweeping over the country is putting further pressure on an already significantly stressed health system.

The departing Chair of Arthritis New Zealand and member of the Ministry of Health's Orthopaedic Sector Group and Co-Chair of the MAP Dr Peter Larmer is now urging the Ministry of Health to action a rollout of the rehabilitation programme nationwide.

"I'm delighted the report has finally been released but disappointed that it's taken so long and there's still no action from it."

In Budget 2015, the Government allocated \$6 million of new funding over three years to help improve care for people with OA and associated health conditions. The resulting Mobility Action Plan aimed to improve affected New Zealanders' health and quality of life through improved access to high-quality advice, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment – especially within our most vulnerable communities.

"Those from Māori, Pasifika and high-deprivation areas engaged with the MAP programme better than nearly all previous Ministry of Health initiatives. It showed that people from these populations were willing and able to re-engage", says Dr Larmer.

"Inequity issues can be addressed by taking proactive action and working with these affected groups directly. The MAP is a successful and cost-effective initiative, but the work must start now."

Dr Larmer says he would like to see the Ministry of Health create a clear and active pathway based on the effectiveness of the MAP principles as soon as possible. "The Ministry of Health need to just get on and do it."

The release of the report is especially significant for Osteoarthritis Aotearoa New Zealand, a multidisciplinary group who are developing a National Osteoarthritis Strategy in collaboration with Arthritis New Zealand. There is currently no national model of care for OA management within Aotearoa New Zealand.

"We now have an indispensable resource which we have been waiting for a significant period to ensure the development of the Strategy can be informed by the best possible evidence base available," says the group.

The group also note that widespread transmission of the Omicron variant will result in people with end stage OA likely having to wait even longer for surgery. More positively, the group feels this presents an important opportunity to showcase community-based options designed to assist those with OA which have the potential to reduce their level of risk and need for surgery. Offering improved access to cost-effective interventions including exercise programmes is one such example.

Osteoarthritis Aotearoa New Zealand has established a community of practice focused on improving OA care and research following their OA Basecamp symposium in July 2021. Attendees representing primary, secondary and tertiary care services, health researchers and funders came together to discuss the management and treatment of OA from a range of perspectives. A key feature of this event was priority-setting workshops, and these priorities will guide the co-design of the National Osteoarthritis Strategy for Aotearoa New Zealand.

The group plan to lobby funders to implement evidence-based OA management and will be engaging with representatives from the Ministry of Health in the coming months to move the conversation forward. A follow-up OA Summit event will be held in Wellington in November 2022 with a venue to be confirmed in due course.

ENDS

For further comment, please contact:

Philip Kearney

Chief Executive, Arthritis New Zealand, P.O. Box 10-020, Wellington 6143

Phone: 04 472 5641 **Mobile:** 027 419 8946 **Email:** Philip.Kearney@arthritis.org.nz