



Asthma Foundation NT Struggling To Breathe- Background

Asthma is a major chronic disease, affecting one in every 20 Territorians. The Asthma Foundation of the Northern Territory (AFNT) has operated for 40 years, delivering specialist services and education to those residents and their families.

In 2017 all State and Territory Foundations voted on merging into a single national body – Asthma Australia (AA). Along with Tasmania and WA, AFNT members decided not to merge. AFNT members were concerned that local programs and initiatives would be swamped by east-coast interests and there was lack of clarity around how AA would be structured. It was decided to remain independent of Asthma Australia and see how AA was going to accommodate the particular needs of the NT as a centralised agency.

In 2022 AA indicated it is now especially focused on various pilot studies, research projects and community development initiatives aimed at identifying key social and environmental causes of asthma. The intention is to design programs that will address those factors and make long-term change largely through prevention. AFNT acknowledges the value of this kind of work and the possibility of benefits being delivered some years down the track, but it is concerned that this focus does not address the daily and immediate needs of people already affected by asthma.

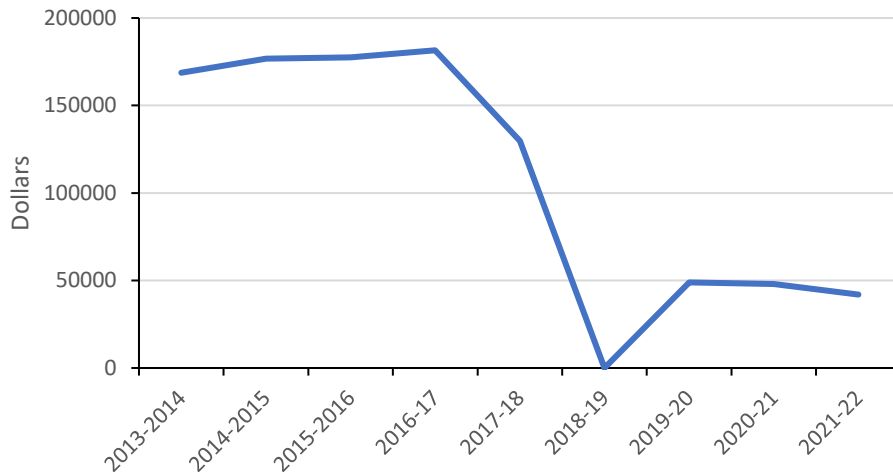
The focus of AFNT has always been providing support to people living with asthma. Services include spirometry testing, assessment, and ongoing monitoring and advice so clients gain greater control over their asthma. These services are widely used by GPs and hospitals. AFNT also provides prevention programs and education to young people so they are more aware of asthma and how they can assist peers to avoid attacks occurring. There are also training programs for families, health professionals, teachers and other workplaces to ensure people know what to do if someone suffers from asthma while in their care.

The Northern Territory Government (NTG) has been a long-time funder of the AFNT and its continuing grant covers the bulk of AFNT operations. Until 2018 this was supplemented by Commonwealth funding. Since stepping back from the AA merger, Commonwealth funds have reduced by two-thirds. Its direct contribution to addressing asthma in the NT is \$42k a year – from a national budget of \$2.1M.

Much of that reduction was a consequence of AFNT not adopting the intervention program promoted by Asthma Australia - COACH. That program had no face-to-face contact and it was relatively inflexible and complex in both administration and client requirements. Flaws in the program for the NT context were communicated to AA and it was not adopted by AFNT. AA abandoned COACH in 2022.



Commonwealth Funding to AFNT



From July 2018 to December 2021 the COACH program dealt with only 1136 of all those in need of consulting services from across the entire nation. Just over half completed the full program. A 2022 evaluation of COACH¹ reported that people with asthma are wanting “a service which is less formal, more personalised and flexible so as to suit their personal circumstances” – precisely what AFNT has been offering.

AFNT has borne significant costs to maintain effective client consultations to the NT over the last five years. Other important programs have been severely reduced or removed (including its innovative Asthma Swim Program that ran for 20 years), operating costs have been trimmed close to the bone and staffing levels have been constrained. AFNT reserves have been called on in anticipation that original funding would be restored.

An important area that AFNT has been working on over the last couple of years has been extending more regular and effective services to regional and remote parts of the Territory. Early work has highlighted benefits from the approach taken and AFNT has been exploring further ways of enhancing delivery - especially to Aboriginal communities. Progress on this work is now being jeopardised and this can have tragic consequences.

A 29 year old woman died in remote Central Australia. Her death most likely would have been prevented if the patient, family and community were better educated and proficient in asthma management. Despite multiple presentations and best efforts of community members, there was a lack of awareness and capacity to deliver best practices. Unlike urban settings, there are limited opportunities for remote locations to be adequately supported to ensure proper diagnosis and monitoring of flare-ups, preparation of a written asthma action plan, correct monitoring of reliever use and practical understanding among family and the community of how they could intervene. Equipping people to take greater control of their asthma should not be determined by where the person lives. Remote and regional work may be more resource intensive but it is no less important.

¹ Asthma Australia *Asthma Management Program Final Evaluation Report 2018-2022* page 21



Despite many discussions, the Commonwealth and AA have not been prepared to return AFNT funding. This has brought AFNT to a critical juncture. For the sake of a modest amount of money that simply brings AFNT funding back to pre-merger levels, all AFNT programs now face severe compromise or cancellation and the viability of the organisation into the near future is a looming issue.

Any merger with AA depends on a vote by the 400 members of AFNT. For the foreseeable future there do not appear to be comparable replacement services that AA will make available to Territorians should AFNT close its doors.

It is concerning that AFNT finds itself in this position because it exercised caution about merging when critical questions were still to be answered. The withdrawal of funds is not because of dubious and ineffective services or incompetent management. It has been a deliberate choice by those in charge of AMP monies to cut support for the long running approaches proven appropriate for the Territory. AFNT contributes significantly to reducing the impact of asthma in the community and yet it receives minimal from the Federal program specifically aimed at that very outcome.

The resources of AFNT are solely dedicated to the individuals and families affected by asthma who live in the Territory. Whatever donation or sponsorship dollars come into the Foundation, whatever hours can be put aside by volunteers to assist with public events and education campaigns, and whatever ideas and proposals people might have for improving the lot of people affected by asthma – all are directed first and foremost to “helping Territorians breathe better”.

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