

## Yoga for Pain *Down South*

Using non-traditional providers and local knowledge to increase options for people with, or at risk of, chronic pain in regional Australia.

Yoga for Pain *Down South* is a partnership between Yoga for Pain Care Australia and GP down south, targeting Warren-Blackwood, Margaret River-Augusta and Collie-Harvey. The program's first phase was February - July 2018 and was possible thanks to funding from WA Primary Health Alliance.

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Sep 6 2018



**GP down south**  
Local health. Our business.



**WAPHA**  
WA Primary Health Alliance

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**More people experience chronic pain in regional Australia than our cities, increasing the prevalence of unemployment, social isolation and mental illness - and their flow-on economic costs.**

Chronic pain costs Australia \$34b each year and affects 1 in 5 people, including children. In what can be a vicious cycle, pain can lead to depression, suicide ideation and social isolation - which are also its risk factors.

While pain education has increased for health professionals, specialist services are almost non-existent outside major cities. Even those who do access good medical care can “fall through the net”. Tele-health trials by major hospitals increasingly provide patients with knowledge, but don’t offer the ongoing support they need to practice pain management skills on their own, sometimes after years or decades of poor health.

Not-for-profit GP down south partnered with Yoga for Pain Care Australia, a national social enterprise that provides training for yoga teachers and health professionals in the **field of practice of Yoga for Pain**. Our aim was to create self-sustaining options for people with, or at risk of, persistent pain in regional Western Australia, specifically the South West. **To assist with increasing demands on Australia’s health and social care systems, these programs would be designed to continue in the future, without funding.**

Informing premises underpinning the initiative included:

- A. To *reduce existing chronic pain* we need to help people practice self-management long enough to retain the benefits.
- B. To *reduce recurrence* of chronic pain we must also help them to develop protective factors, like physical activity, social interaction and mental wellbeing.
- C. Those protective factors may *enable prevention* for those who are at risk.
- D. With the right conditions, those protective factors also *enrich* life and community participation, improving community cohesion and longterm health outcomes.

Through WAPHA-funded Integrated Chronic Disease Care funding, we were able to co-create and pilot *Yoga for Pain Down South*. The initiative comprised four parts:

- 1) Development program for nine, competitively selected health professionals and yoga teachers



- 2) Eight pain care yoga pilot courses in chronic health hot spots
- 3) Community information and engagement
- 4) Subsidised pain care yoga classes for people with multiple health issues

Informed by global pain research, local knowledge and health promotion principles, *Yoga for Pain Down South* ran from March to June 2018 across Warren-Blackwood, Margaret River-Augusta and Collie-Harvey.

Over 40 providers applied for the development program, which were offered on partial scholarship. Selection was based on demonstrated interest in chronic pain care, experience making a difference in their community and diversity of perspective they could contribute to the group learning. The cohort included yoga teachers, physiotherapists, one occupational therapist and an emergency nurse. They came from Collie, Harvey, Margaret River, Augusta and Northcliffe.

After a 4.5-day group training, each provider ran a four-week pain care yoga pilot course, supported through mentoring. These courses were full, with wait lists. *Yoga for Pain Down South* attracted media attention, including a video by ABC South West with over 10,000 views.

Trained providers join a **national community of Yoga for Pain Practitioners**, offering a range of services and price points for specific groups in their community.

This report explains the background, design process, research and execution of *Yoga for Pain Down South*. We discuss program innovations and key learnings that can inform a **proposed model for using non-traditional providers to provide chronic disease support and prevention in regional communities**.

## Key numbers

- 100% training completion rate for selected providers, including assignments
- 8 four-week pain care yoga pilot courses full, with wait lists
- 89% of people with pain who attended said they were better able to manage their pain

*When you see items in italics, they describe how we responded to learnings along the way. This is so readers get a glimpse into the action-research methodology.*



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# Interest from providers and community

## 1. Interest from local providers

We received over 40 applications for the development program. Margaret River was the most represented town. In the application form, providers were asked to demonstrate interest, availability to offer services in the catchment areas, and how the program could enhance their work and community.

We offered 10 scholarships, of which nine accepted (the tenth discovered she had a clash with another event). The nine included eight yoga teachers, two physiotherapists, an occupational therapist and emergency nurse from Collie, Harvey, Margaret River, Northcliffe and Augusta.

Applicants were selected for their capacity to demonstrate their interest went beyond receiving low cost training, or earning more money; their experience working with pain; previous community contribution and diversity of perspective. The intention had been to offer up to 12 places: however, based on the high calibre of the original nine, and our requirements to form a diverse group that could support each other, we elected to keep to the nine.

## 2. Community engagement

- ABC South West did a 55 second social media video that generated 10k views, over 200 likes and 77 shares. This was far greater than other ABC videos in the same form.
- Many Practitioners filled their classes with their own wait list of clients, before public advertising

## 3. Initial reaction from local yoga teachers and health professionals

Initial reactions from local providers (i.e. potential participants in the development program) informed our approach to designing the program.

We noted:

- Practice nurses were enthusiastic about the service coming to town. They saw it could be an appropriate health and wellbeing strategy for a range of patients, i.e. not just for those with pain.



- The response from one GP reflected a common attitude and limited understanding of what Yoga for Pain is: “I’ve sent people to yoga before and the teachers haven’t been aware of how to manage people with pain”.
- We quickly received a large number of applications - though many teachers were concerned about missing existing classes they teach, and about our recommendation to minimise commitments during the training, due to the high demand of the course.

*We provided selected training providers with early reading materials, and reminders about the opportunity they were being offered, including early notification of the Practitioner network. We also worked on information for local referrers.*

#### **4. System engagement**

Background research by Yoga for Pain Care Australia meant the training was up to date with current trends in pain care. Symbiotic system interest included:

- GP down south was contacted by a physiotherapist who received Pain Revolution’s scholarship to up-skill as a pain educator, explaining she can provide community education sessions.
- To ABC South West’s video, many other yoga Teachers (particularly from outside our catchment area) posted that they will soon start teaching classes for pain. While these may not have the precision and educated system approach of a Yoga for Pain Practitioner, their work demonstrates the wider impact of this program.

As an addition, GP down south engaged a provider from Perth to run pain education for local health professionals.



# Who attended pain care yoga and what they said

Of 48 people who attended pain care yoga classes, the Partnership received 28 feedback forms.

## 1. Pain conditions were diverse

Pain issues disclosed by participants were diverse and many experienced more than one.

|                  |                          |                     |                     |
|------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Fibromyalgia (1) | Rheumatoid arthritis (6) | Osteoarthritis (4)  | Knee pain (2)       |
| Headaches (1)    | Neck pain (3)            | Upper back pain (1) | Lower back pain (6) |
| Shoulder (2)     | Bursitis (1)             |                     |                     |

Participants also disclosed: Hashimotos (1)      COPD (2)      Anxiety/ depression (2)

## 2. 89% said they can better manage their pain

After the four, mostly one-hour classes, 25 of the 28 (89%) participants said they were better able to manage their pain. One of the three who said she couldn't better manage her pain wrote: "I can see how this will help but four weeks isn't enough to know what to do at home." She said she felt more hope and confidence and will definitely continue yoga.

## 3. Benefits for people with pain had five key themes

Themes were **realising yoga could help** in general, **specific techniques** they learned, experiencing **less pain**, becoming **more aware** (of knowledge and themselves) and feeling **more confident**.

"Realising some forms of yoga and movement can help."

"Breathing techniques."

"The gentle movement is beneficial for pain control."

"Props to assist me to be able to do yoga poses without pain."

"Relaxation techniques - knowing stress and pain interrelatedness."

"Being aware of more of what your body is telling you."

"Becoming mindful of how my body is feeling."

"Gaining greater understanding of how pain works."

"Gentleness is OK, it's allowed."

"Acknowledging it is important to take time for myself to relax."

"Confidence to attend regular yoga classes."

"Confidence to practice at home."



# The 3 program innovations

We began this initiative with an aim to increase options for people with pain in South West WA. The action-research approach uncovered 3 key innovations that could fill a big gap in pain care in this region.

## 1. Non-medical providers offer pain care services in a community setting

Whereas traditional pain management is delivered in a medical or health care setting, the model for *Yoga for Pain Down South* Pain enables transitional pain care provision in a community setting, delivered by informed but non-medical providers. The service is particularly useful for those transitioning from medical care to self-management, and as a way to engage those who are at risk of persistent pain.

## 2. Specifically targeting areas of high need

Pain is generally considered a medical issue, but your risk of getting chronic pain, your likelihood of recovery, and your access to services are all affected by social and economic factors. By targeting yoga teachers and health professionals from towns identified as chronic health hotspots and offering partial scholarships we increased services in areas of need, by providers with local knowledge. People on low incomes with certain health conditions were offered subsidised places which further increased accessibility.

## 3. The intention is lifelong support and wellbeing

Most chronic pain management aims to rule out causes of pain, and teach self-management. The risk is that people do not continue with self-management adequately, or that life stresses triggers a pain recurrence. Providers we trained as Yoga for Pain Practitioners may support their clients for many years, as clients progress into more advanced classes over time. This allows clients to progress, enrich their health and meaning over the course of their life, beyond pain.

*Recognising that achieving this outcome would require more than just training for providers, Yoga for Pain Down South was subsequently used to refer to the entire program, comprising Practitioner development, pilot courses, community education and subsidised pain care yoga courses.*

