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Medical advances to heart treatment key to longer lives: Bureau of Statistics

by [Lucas Baird](#)

Australia's heart is beating more strongly than ever according to a milestone report that credited the increased understanding of how to prevent and treat acute heart diseases as a key reason for Australia's increased life expectancy.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Changing Patterns of Mortality* report showed the death rate from heart conditions had dropped by over 90 per cent in the last half-century. At the height of its epidemic in 1968, ischaemic heart, cerebrovascular and chronic lower respiratory diseases killed more than 50,000 Australians.

James Eynstone-Hinkins, director of health and vital statistics at the ABS, said the decrease, especially among middle-aged Australians, has contributed significantly to increased life expectancy and has changed the pattern of mortality in Australia.

Life expectancy for males born today has grown from 67.6 to 80.5 years. For females it has grown from 74.2 to 84.6 years for females, when comparing 1965-67 with 2015-17.

"Medical interventions such as coronary bypass grafts, treatment of risk factors such as high cholesterol and hypertension and public health campaigns have all played a part in reducing cardiovascular mortality in Australia," Mr Eynstone-Hinkins said.

Today, death from chronic heart diseases is more common than that from heart attacks, and accounted for more than half of all heart disease deaths last year.

But despite the welcome decreases, heart disease continues to be Australia's leading cause of death in 2017 and the second leading cause of premature death – a fact that has caused the the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute's Bob Graham to urge Australia not to rest on its laurels.

"I think what we're doing is good regarding how we treat these diseases," he said. "But we are going to see a resurgence of heart diseases in 20 years.

"We have a new epidemic looming."

He said the ageing population, rising rates of obesity and diabetes, and lack of research funding would put the country into crisis areas at a time when it already spends billions on treating cardiovascular diseases.

"It's already the highest cost by disease," he said. "We have not kept research funding up with that.

"We virtually have no philanthropic operations donating money to cardiovascular research ... we have half as many people working on heart disease research as we have on cancer."

Meanwhile, dementia and Alzheimer's disease rose from the 40th biggest cause of death to the second in the 50 years between 1968 and now.

Increased life expectancy is the main reason for this increase but there are also death certification changes and classification changes, which have contributed to the emergence of dementia as a leading cause.

While there was a dramatic fall in deaths from land transport accidents, there was a rise in diabetes-related deaths from 1.8 to 3 per cent of the population.