

Great expectations on health require real action

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The battery of reviews into Australia's health system currently underway indicate the Government recognises the need for real action and greater investment in health, but the next Federal Budget must show the Government is for real on health, the Consumers Health Forum says.

Releasing CHF's submission for the 2020 Federal Budget, CEO Leanne Wells said CHF proposed 23 recommendations for change covering ten broad areas ranging from prevention to aged care and primary health.

"The fallout from the catastrophic bush fires highlights the need for resilient community health services and we specifically support the funding for additional mental health and community support services. The health impacts from the fires will be felt by many for years and there needs to be adequate provision for these now and in future Budgets.

"It is repeatedly said that Australia has a high-quality health care system, yet we see signs of weakening in important areas. While the Commonwealth Fund's international comparisons rank Australia second overall, we fare relatively poorly in terms of equity at seventh out of 11 countries, and fourth on access," Ms Wells said.

"These findings are reinforced by the results of a survey CHF undertook on people's views of the health system. While the majority of consumers were satisfied with the outcomes of health services they received, they had concerns about the uncertainty and the cost of services, both of which are important components of access. Clearly there is room for improvement in terms of access and equity.

"The Government is giving signals of the need for health care reform. CHF urges it to ensure that the Budget will foreshadow if not enable real improvements.

"Last August, Health Minister Greg Hunt released *Australia's Long Term National Health Plan* which set out a reform agenda for a better health system. He has commenced work on a 10-year Primary Health Care Plan and a National Preventive Health Strategy, both of which are scheduled for release after the Budget. The Minister is also looking at mental health reform with the Productivity Commission undertaking an Inquiry into Mental health with the final report due to Government just after the Budget on May 23.

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“A key area of inequity in health outcomes is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who still, after many years of Closing the Gap measures, have shorter life expectancy than non-Indigenous peoples and worse health outcomes. We call upon the Federal Government to take action on the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and to continue to work with National Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and other key Indigenous health groups to work to close the gap and end this great health inequity.

“There are a number of other key policy processes underway that could influence health reform. The Medical Benefits Schedule review is still underway with recommendations on some key areas, including general practice, primary health care and telehealth measures yet to be finalised. The Minister has also announced that he wants to put in place another instalment of reforms of private health insurance, building on those implemented in 2018 and 2019 as well as addressing the pressing problem of out of pocket costs for specialist services and procedures.

“The Seventh Community Pharmacy is due to come into effect on 1 July 2020 and this will determine the direction for community pharmacy for the next five years. We have urged reforms to ensure pharmacy is seen as part of the primary health care system with real benefits to consumers.

“The Minister has also commissioned action plans and strategies, such as the National Women’s Health Strategy and others aimed at people with particular conditions, for example the National Action Plan for Endometriosis. CHF calls on the federal government to provide funding to implement all these strategies.

“These plans are evidence that the Minister is prepared to act. We trust the Budget will make that possible,” Ms Wells said.

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