

# Health budget must counter COVID cracks

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The Federal budget must step up investments in health and social wellbeing if Australia's health system is to come out of the COVID pandemic in strong shape, the Consumers Health Forum says.

In its [submission on the 2022 Federal Budget](#), CHF has proposed a range of measures that reflect the lessons learned from the pandemic, including more investment in income support and public housing, as crucial to promoting a healthier Australia.

The CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said the health system's capacity to meet the extraordinary demands had been tested by the pandemic.

"Overall, our health system has been able to continue to provide high quality care but there are cracks emerging that will widen and last longer than the epidemic.

"We need to make sure that the lessons are learnt about underinvesting in health, because without a healthy and safe population it is impossible to deliver on some of the other goals we have as a community. CHF has called for health to be treated as an investment rather than an expenditure item and we strongly reiterate this call in this submission.

"We urge the Government to release the 10-year Primary Care Plan and make down payments to support the leadership roles of GPs in coordinating care.

"A first step would be to increase the Medicare Benefits Schedule rebates for primary health services for GPs and others to restore the real value of the rebates and improve health care affordability and accessibility by reducing out of pocket costs faced by consumers. This would be good news for patients, GPs and our strained hospitals.

"A second step would be more innovative funding models to ensure primary care can respond with flexible, patient-centred, prevention-oriented, multidisciplinary team

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based care. If primary care teams are to spend time with patients on preventive care such as healthy eating as well as illness management, they need to be flexibly funded.

“Other practical innovations would support patients with chronic conditions and their doctors by incorporating social prescribing into routine care. Referring patients to community activities such as art classes, meditation or exercise can improve health outcomes.

“A glaring gap in Australia’s so-called universal health system has been the absence of realistic funding for dental health services.

“CHF calls on the Federal Government to develop a plan to move to a universal dental health scheme. The first step should be the establishment of a Seniors Dental Benefit Scheme, modelled on the Child Dental Benefit Scheme to provide access to services for older people living in residential aged care facilities and others in need,” Ms Wells said.

Other Budget measures CHF has proposed include:

- Funding for all pandemic testing and treatment services to ensure cost is not a barrier to access,
- The establishment of a National Centre for Disease Control, to respond to, coordinate and manage communicable diseases and outbreaks. It is likely that COVID-19, including new strains and outbreaks, will circulate for some time, and that other new and existing diseases may emerge. There is a need for more independent, focused, national coordinating centre that pulls together global, expert advice, as is provided in other comparable countries.
- Establishing an Australian Consumer Leadership Academy to provide an articulated pathway for a formal qualification that provides a benchmark for consumer leadership and best practice and a network of graduates equipped to occupy senior, decision making and advisory roles.

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