

Federal Health Budget: steady as she goes, not transformational

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The Consumers Health Forum welcomes tonight's health budget as a solid budget which continues to invest in health care for Australians.

The highlights for health consumers include targeted cost of living measures to make medicines more affordable, significant investments in mental health services, and permanency of Medicare subsidised telehealth.

The [Voice of Australian Health Consumers](#) Report, released yesterday by CHF and our academic collaborators, starkly reveal that one quarter of people surveyed said that they did not fill a prescription or omitted medicines and a third said this was because of cost. 24 percent reported serious levels of mental distress.

CHF CEO, Leanne Wells said that: "Lowering the PBS Safety Net eligibility threshold for both concessional and non-concessional patients is a long-standing initiative advocated by CHF and will improve outcomes for people who have chronic conditions or multiple prescription needs."

"Young people have experienced unprecedented psychological distress in association with the pandemic. Support for critical community-based services like Lifeline, the Early Psychosis Youth Services, headspace and new eating disorder treatment clinics will make a real difference, although more investment is always warranted," Ms Wells said.

"Australians have embraced digital health care, partly because it was a vital necessity during pandemic lockdowns and also because they value its convenience. It is now important to make telehealth a commonplace service in healthcare as 71% of Australians who use telehealth said it was as good or better than face-to-face care."

Other welcome measures are the support for pharmacists embedded in government-funded residential aged care facilities (RACFs), which means more quality and safe medication management and avoidance of the harms and costs that are associated with medication misadventure.

Notable for regional Australia, is \$296.5 million in funding towards the 10-Year Stronger Rural Health Strategy with funding towards putting more health professionals into rural and regional areas. This will mean more health care support for the 55 per cent percent of rural health consumers in the survey who said they needed more doctors, nurses and health workers in the regions.

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Consumers shaping health

“It was pleasing to see the Budget include measures to address the needs of key groups in our community. The women’s health package will see new endometriosis and pelvic pain GP clinics and enhanced breast and cervical cancer screening,” said Ms Wells.

“We particularly welcome specific health communications campaigns and preventive health initiatives for CALD communities, but stress that these must be co designed with the communities themselves. The pandemic highlighted the crucial need for all Australians to receive healthcare information that’s appropriately targeted.”

“While we welcome the release of the 10 Year Primary Health Care Plan, we are disappointed that after two years of extensive consultation and co-design with all stakeholders including consumers, there has been a failure to commit to a funded program of transformational implementation.

This is a lost opportunity for the government to lead and drive major structural and financing reform in primary care. Primary care is the backbone of a high performing health system and is the first place people turn to for healthcare. We cannot afford for it to experience under-investment and become overwhelmed.

Targeted affordability measures need to be incorporated into primary health care. While our sentiment survey showed that 84 percent of Australians were satisfied with the health care services they received, we have a long way to go to ensure accessible, affordable services. Primary care reform must address these issues.

“While there looks to be significant investment in preventive health, there is a cluster of small-scale project-based measures and no cohesive and consolidated plan.”

Australians need to have confidence that our hospital system is sustainable and able to cope with increased demand as the population ages. Hospital spending is up almost \$20 billion in 14 years. While this reflects demand, there does not appear to have been any genuine attempt to leverage this scale of funding to reform the way we deliver hospital care and to systemically take the pressure off hospitals through alternatives like hospital in the home.

“Most disappointingly some of the measures we were hoping to see were missing, such as pledges to a national social prescribing scheme, no meaningful investments to improve access to dental and the creation of a National Centre for Disease Control, said Ms Wells.

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