

## **Budget's modest response to aged care and mental health inquiries**

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The Budget has offered a modest but welcome response to the compelling recommendations for, transformational reform and substantial funding urged by two national inquiries into the unacceptable state of aged care and mental health in Australia, the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

"The Budget has acknowledged that fundamental reform is required and that this is a long-term game. It has promised new spending of \$17.7 billion over four years on top of existing investment. This is a down payment on the additional resourcing desperately required in terms of staffing and services.

"It is encouraging that the Health Minister has set out a detailed five year – five pillar Aged Care Reform Plan in response to the Royal Commission report. The Government commits to "major reform" for home care, residential aged care quality and safety, residential aged care services and sustainability, workforce, and governance, but with little detail how these goals will be achieved.

"The Government has committed new funding to practical and targeted measures that should significantly improve the system and says it will fund another very welcome 80,000 new home care packages, bringing the total to 275,000 home care packages available. Remaining at home is what most people want: it is pleasing that these are promised to be implemented in the first two years.

"Among other benefits it is aiming to increase the time nurses and carers are required to spend with residents. The Budget allows for an additional

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payment of \$10 per resident per day to enhance the viability and sustainability of the residential aged care sector.

“More than 33,000 new training places for personal carers, and a new Indigenous workforce and retention bonuses to keep more nurses in aged care are among other positives.

“These are all welcome answers to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety which found poor quality care and “fundamental system flaws” in the design and governance of aged care.

“On mental health and suicide prevention, the Government states it is investing in ‘landmark reforms’ in the largest investment in mental health by any Government – complemented by the investment in prevention and early intervention. The Budget will deliver a \$2.3 billion National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan. . The creation of a national network including up to an initial 57 additional mental health treatment centres and satellites for adults, youth and children, through Head to Health and headspace programs is promised.

We’re told repeatedly that consumers experience disconnected services. We will be looking for how these services will integrate with existing arrangements. We can’t afford to risk further fragmenting of care.

The critical issue for so many mental health patients is the often high out-of-pocket costs they face to get the treatment they need. A critical test will be whether these new services overcome this barrier.

There are promising measures that if implemented well will deliver services where people are most comfortable and best supported such as the Head to Health digital platform and more localised, community-based services. These digital services should go a long way to modernising mental health care.

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“The Treasurer said tonight that the ‘Australian spirit has shone through’. These measures will make a difference to the lives of many people. We need to see that spirit matched with ongoing and increased investment when it comes to health and wellbeing. If COVID taught us anything it is that health is an economic investment.

“In the fight against COVID, it is welcome that the Budget allocates a further \$1.9 billion for the roll out of vaccines. Australians have already received over 2.5 million doses. This Budget provides another \$1.5 billion for COVID-related health services, including for testing and tracing, respiratory clinics and telehealth.

“While there is spending to continue some primary care services such as after hours and public dental, it is disappointing that there is no additional primary care reforms on the table.

“In other measures, \$250.9 million will be invested in immediate priorities for the soon-to-be finalised National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030, improving cancer screening for life-threatening cancers, and ongoing alcohol and drug services.

“The Budget continues reforms under the Stronger Rural Health Strategy to ensure equity of access for all Australians, with \$123 million to strengthen the rural health workforce and improve services in regional Australia. It will commit \$65.8 million to increase bulk billing incentive payments for doctors working in remote areas and rural towns, reducing the out-of-pocket cost for patients and improving viability of primary care services in these communities,” Ms Wells said.

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