

## Spread telehealth to stop spread of coronavirus

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The demand for isolation and social distancing forced by coronavirus makes it imperative for telehealth to be supported across as many accredited health services as possible, the Consumers Health Forum said today.

“We urge the Government to act on the advice of doctors, nurses and allied health practitioners and expand Medicare to cover telehealth services so clinicians can provide maximum help at minimal risk to many more patients and not just to known coronavirus risks,” the CEO of CHF, Leanne Wells, said.

“The current limited availability of Medicare-funded telehealth services to specified patient groups represents a lost opportunity to reduce the hazards for clinicians and patients of direct physical consultation and of unnecessary patient travel, while encouraging consumes to seek vital attention.

“We have written to Health Minister, Greg Hunt, late last week welcoming Government telehealth measures announced so far to contain the spread of the virus and to support the community with regular, clear information as the situation rapidly evolves and changes.

“This is an important measure to help prevent further community transmission, however there is more we can do.

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“CHF believes it is time to expand these measures to respond to this escalating situation. CHF supports calls from the AMA, the RACGP and the Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association that primary care providers should have immediate access to telehealth for treatment of all patients, not just for screening and treatment of potential COVID-19 cases.

“This is an important step to both minimise community spread of COVID-19 and ensure that consumers with other pressing health needs can access timely care.

“As an example of potential benefits of expanding telehealth, Australia’s largest health workforce outside hospitals, the 82,000 nurses working in primary health care, could play a vital role through telehealth so people with chronic disease can continue to receive care at home during the COVID-19 crisis, keeping pressure off hospitals.

“CHF strongly supports the call from organisations representing people with intellectual or developmental disability for support to access coronavirus prevention, screening and treatment for people with intellectual or developmental disability.

“We need to take urgent action to prepare and equip all levels of our health care sector to be able to work with disability groups, and their support networks to prevent, screen, and treat COVID-19.

“CHF would also like to see an increase in community testing as much as possible. It is important that we learn lessons from what is occurring overseas where a number of countries have been more successful at containing the spread of the virus through widespread testing efforts.

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“We are also concerned about reports that some health services have been required to raise the threshold for COVID-19 testing due to limited testing supplies.

“CHF reiterates our support for pharmacists delivering flu vaccinations in the community. With flu season fast approaching and reports of GP clinics being overwhelmed with COVID-19 inquiries, it is important that alternative options are available for consumers to readily access the flu vaccine and reduce their risk of additional infection and complications.

“In all parts of the health system COVID-19 presents extraordinary challenges. We must be ready to make changes that ensure community health and safety takes priority,” Ms Wells said.

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