

Consumer health care priorities for 2018

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In this new year, the Federal Government should look to harness the forces transforming the health system and recognise the contribution health makes to national productivity, the Consumers Health Forum says.

“The internet-enabled consumer power that has transformed people’s interaction with the economy in areas such as banking, travel and telecommunications is rapidly creeping into the tradition-bound world of health care,” the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

“The dynamics of health are shifting towards a stronger role for consumers. With the right support through self-management programs and services, many of which can be digitally enabled and delivered, and roles leading and shaping health care policy, consumers are better placed than ever to drive innovation and improvement in health care. In 2018, developments on a variety of health fronts will reinforce this trend.

“The gradual roll-out of consumer-centred primary care, the critical need to put in place community-based alternatives to hospital care, expansion of the My Health Record and proposals for a database where patients can check their surgeons’ fees and performance records when taking up a referral, exemplify the changing influences in health.

Contact: Mark Metherell, 0429 111 986

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“These changes all involve technological advances and better availability of data. They are well within Australia’s capabilities and are ripe for implementation.

“Most significantly, these long-overdue directions in health care all involve shifts where more information is in the hands of consumers, shared decision making with patients and families and care coordinated around the things that matter most to consumers are central.

“Individually-tailored health is more likely to succeed with an electronic health record that enables both patient and clinician to have accurate and up to date information; and patients and clinicians are likely to experience more positive outcomes when patients can make well-informed decisions about choice of specialist.

“The power of information technology is making it possible for patients to access not only fees but surgeons’ performance in a way that was not thought feasible just a few years ago.

“Too few Australian consumers have sufficient access to the information they need to make well informed choices about their health and care. If we are to strengthen our health system we must address the low levels of health literacy in our community.

“Health is an investment and many of the reforms that could drive better health outcomes need additional expenditure now for society to reap the long-term benefits.

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“This new spending need not be excessive. Indeed if Australia took a longer term view on preventive health, acting now with a national concerted campaign to counter obesity would pay huge dividends in extended, healthy lives into the future.

“A health levy on sugary drinks --- recommended by the World Health Organisation and now implemented in a dozen other countries --- could help health and finance other educational and support programs to promote better diets and more exercise.

“We need higher funding to make a reality of integrated primary care, delivered in the community and providing services that avoid the need for more costly hospitalisation.

“Developments in health care management are showing that team-based, consumer-centred care for people with chronic and complex conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular disease, result not only in better health outcomes but more satisfied patients and clinical staff and potentially lower overall costs.

“Informed health consumers need to have a central role in designing and implementing health care reforms and health research if Australia’s health system is to get best value for money and the Federal Government should support developments such as community networks to work in partnership with Primary Health Networks to achieve worthwhile consumer-centred outcomes.

“These are among the proposals we have put in our Budget submission to the Federal Treasurer, Scott Morrison.

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Investment in these health priorities for 2018 would be a solid downpayment on the Productivity Commission's* recommendation that the health care system be reconfigured around the principles of patient centred care within a five year time frame" Ms Wells said.

The CHF Budget submission is at: https://chf.org.au/sites/default/files/chf_federal_budget_submission_2018-19_.pdf

*The Productivity Commission report chapter on health is at <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/productivity-review/report/2-healthier-australians>

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