

‘Medicare at home’ a vital step to counter COVID-19

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The expansion of telehealth services to cover all medical and many allied health consultations is a watershed advance in the fight against coronavirus, the Consumers Health Forum said today.

Responding to the Federal Government’s \$669 million boost to Medicare payments for telehealth services to support phone and video consultations, the CEO of Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said the new measure was a “win, win” for patients and doctors.

“This much-expanded telehealth ‘Medicare at home’ measure keeps both patients and providers safe in terms of social distancing but also safeguards and ensures care for those non-coronavirus patients with complex chronic conditions so they can continue to be cared for safely.

“This development highlights how much we can better maximise available capabilities, even the telephone, to improve our campaign against coronavirus. Now we need to see governments and private hospitals working together to ensure their huge capabilities can be recruited in the fight against the virus.

“While the initial step to extend some support for telehealth services for COVID-affected patients was a start, today’s announcement means people will be able to access support in their own home using their telephone, or video conferencing features like FaceTime to connect with GP services, mental health treatment, chronic disease management, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health assessments, services to people with eating disorders, pregnancy support counselling, services to patients in aged care facilities, children with autism, after-hours consultations and nurse practitioners.

“We welcome the doubled bulk billing incentives too. It is so important that people losing jobs or taking pay cuts can access affordable general practice.

“The mental health package is also timely. However, we are concerned that given the heightened levels of anxiety in the community that will endure and extend way beyond ‘the other side’ of the pandemic this should be seen as a down payment only with more support to follow.

“We support Health Minister Greg Hunt that health services at home is a key weapon in the fight against coronavirus while limiting unnecessary exposure of patients and health professionals to the virus, wherever treatment can be safely delivered by phone or videoconferencing.

“This will take pressure off hospitals and emergency departments and allow people to access essential health services in their home, while supporting self-isolation and quarantine policies.

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“Another bold step that would reduce the mounting strain on public hospitals would be for the private sector, hospitals and health funds, to step up their work with the federal and state governments to ensure that the private infrastructure and workforce can join the community-wide campaign against the virus.

“If there was ever a time we needed a coordinated single health system it is now,” Ms Wells said.

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