

MEDIA RELEASE

The best script is what matters to you

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Social prescribing, which involves the referral of patients to non-medical activities to supplement conventional care, should become a standard part of Australian health care, three national health organisations say.

The Consumers Health Forum, Mental Health Australia and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners are calling for the Federal Government to develop and implement an Australian-wide social prescribing scheme as part of the Government's 10 Year Primary Health Care Plan.

Social prescribing, which has been introduced widely in the UK and is being successfully trialled in Canada and Singapore, offers a system of support and guidance for people struggling with chronic conditions to connect with their community, counter loneliness, depression and anxiety and improve their overall health outcomes by taking up simple but therapeutic activities including group walking, reading groups and group event art classes, as just a few examples.

It is an approach that asks patients 'What matters to you' as well as 'what's the matter with you'.

RACGP spokesperson Professor Mark Morgan noted that social prescribing was more important now than ever.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is presenting many challenges for primary care, particularly for patients with chronic illness and mental health issues," Professor Morgan said.

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“In the months and years ahead when the full impact of this pandemic becomes clear, including the restrictions placed on social interaction and activities, we must consider all options for how to improve health outcomes. Social prescribing offers an innovative solution for patients with a variety of health concerns.”

The CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said that many people visit their GP for reasons other than medical conditions and typically GPs are increasingly managing patients with concerns such as depression and loneliness associated with chronic conditions.

“Social prescribing is a way of delivering truly person-centred, comprehensive care: it recognises that effective care, particularly for those with chronic illness, should embrace social and lifestyle risk factor management support as well as conventional medical care.

“Social prescribing can work and works best when consumers are empowered to engage in activities that are meaningful to them. There are promising reports that social prescribing results in significant improvements in patient wellbeing and community connections, increasing healthy living behaviours, reductions in anxiety and depression, increases in community engagement and feelings of empowerment, confidence for self-care and resilience to manage health and psychosocial problems”

“What is needed to make social prescribing work is an integrated approach where for example, the general practice can refer patients to appropriate support workers who can guide and encourage patients to more effectively self-manage their health. To maximise the benefits we also need to recognise social prescribing as a regular part of health care, create policy and local systems to support it and fund it accordingly

Mental Health Australia CEO Dr Leanne Beagley said social prescribing has to be part of the solution and options available to all, especially at

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this time of increased need in the provision, and availability, of mental health services.

“A prescription to improve one’s health should be much more than a piece of paper you take to a pharmacist,” said Dr Beagley.

“With the COVID-19 pandemic fast tracking new ways of thinking and innovation in health care, there has never been a more opportune time to improve and increase the availability and understanding of social prescribing and what it is.

“In the mental health ecosystem, we know that social support, connectedness and community engagement can often have a huge impact on one’s wellbeing and recovery.

“Organized and systemic social prescribing referral options for not only GPs, but other health professionals, has the ability to provide truly person centered and person led care, especially if it is backed up with the right workforce in the right places to make it work.”

The three organisations say that COVID-19 has further reinforced the need for strong social connections to maintain health and wellbeing. Australia now has an opportunity to take a more systematic approach to social prescribing through a national social prescribing scheme under the 10 Year Primary Health Care Plan.

This week a webinar on social prescribing drew widespread interest. To view go to <https://youtu.be/jvN60uj45-o>

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