

Telehealth must be the start of the health 'revolution'

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The Federal Budget provides for the beginnings of a "revolution" in health care that should be a down payment for wider reforms and investment to meet 21st century needs, the Consumers Health Forum says.

"The Health Minister, Greg Hunt, has described the expansion of telehealth as a 'revolution in the delivery of primary care' which we strongly support," the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the strength, and the opportunities for more public investments to improve Australia's health system.

"It has shown the link between the health of the community and of the economy is inextricable.

"Telehealth has been stimulated by the pandemic to trigger easier and safe access to doctors and we look forward to further developments after the six month extension to March 2021 expires.

The telehealth disruption shows that transformative change is possible in healthcare and we hold great ambition for the scope of services that will be possible under the 10 Year Primary Health Care Plan currently in development.

"But the pandemic has also shown up the dramatic failings of the aged care system that has brought too many avoidable deaths and too much suffering.

"The lesson for Australia should be that we need to invest much more in a publicly-funded and effectively regulated system.

"The Government says it is making a record investment in health over four years of \$467 billion, up by \$32 billion on last year's figures.

"It is to spend \$2.4 billion on telehealth ---- a development that just nine months ago would have seemed unbelievable.

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"It demonstrates just how much Australians value the universal access offered by Medicare and its potential benefits in time of need.

"The Government has responded to the desperate plight of aged care with a \$408.5 million addition to improve care and quality of aged care, but much more is needed in both funding and deep systemic reforms to this failing system. The announcement of 23,000 more home care packages is a start but many more are needed to meet the estimated 100,000 shortage in places.

"The Budget has also given continued recognition to mental health, including doubling from 10 to 20 the number of Medicare-funded psychological services. That will be readily used by many but will continue to mean many people without the means will be left unable to afford many psychologists whose higher fees are not covered by Medicare.

"It is pleasing to see a strong rural health strategy: we know Australians living in regional, rural and remote Australia face several disadvantages when it comes to workforce supply and healthcare access".

"Trialing new ways of providing health services to smaller connected rural communities across NSW focused on coordinated networks of GPs, nurses and other health providers has the potential to provide proof-of-concept for services that can then be funded in other regional areas which remain in great need".

"Most importantly, the Budget gives comfort that adequate provision has been made for the manufacture and supply of a COVID-19 vaccine should one become available".

"The Government has also introducing changes to private health insurance, including extending the eligibility age of dependent children from 24 to 31 and allowing people with disability to remain on a family policy.

"A potentially transformative change to the overall health system is to extend health insurance cover to home and community-based care for mental health and general rehabilitation services. We urge that this must be clinically appropriate and be a choice of patients and doctors to make without pressure from health funds.

"Many people with insurance will welcome this change, but it will be outside the reach of most people who do not have private cover. Both federal and state governments need to do much more to ensure such timely innovations in health care are available to all Australians.

"If Australia is to maintain an equitable national health system, access to quality care should be open to all," Ms Wells said.

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