

Cost of living still impacting access to healthcare

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The Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) is concerned about [recent data released](#) by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) showing one in ten Australians, living in areas of most socio-economic disadvantage, delayed or went without prescription medication when it was needed due to the cost.

The new data also reveals that the proportion of people citing cost as the primary reason for delaying or avoiding a visit to their GP has risen to 8.8% in 2023-24. This marks an increase from 7% in 2022-23, which itself was already up from the previous year.

"This year's ABS report shows once again that a lot of Australian's continue to do it really tough, with the rising cost-of-living. What it also shows us is that when people can't afford their healthcare costs they go without. For a country like Australia, this just isn't good enough," said Dr Deveny.

CHF has been hearing more and more from consumers over the last two years that keeping up with healthcare costs is becoming harder. This is particularly the case for those consumers who live with a, or several chronic conditions.

"When we talk to consumers about affordability, what we hear really does mirror what we are seeing in the new ABS figures. When compared to paying the rent or putting petrol in the car to get to work, buying medicine or seeing a doctor are seen as discretionary choices. I must pay the rent this week to stay in housing: my cough can wait another week, is what we hear," said Dr Deveny.

Dr Deveny did acknowledge the recent efforts of the Australian Government to help make medicines affordable through the 60-day dispensing program and the increased rate of bulk billing following the introduction of the bulk billing incentive, which is a win for consumers, but noted that clearly more needs to be done so every Australian can afford their essential care.

The data indicates that the cost of living has created obstacles for Australians in accessing mental health services. It reveals that 20.4% of people delayed or avoided seeing a health professional for their mental health needs due to financial constraints.

“We are worried that the continued rising cost of healthcare is becoming the biggest factor in people accessing treatment. It's pretty simple really, if you can't afford healthcare, then you don't go. We know that when people delay treatment it usually results in worse health outcomes for that person,” said Dr Deveny.

It's worth noting that 28% of people said they waited longer than they felt was acceptable for a GP appointment, down slightly from 29.6% last year. However, those in outer-regional, remote, or very isolated areas were 10% more likely to experience longer wait times compared to those in major cities (36.3% vs. 26%).

Consumers Health Forum has been hosting industry and stakeholder meetings and roundtables throughout Perth this week to collect views on the challenges in healthcare, with a focus on regional and remote communities. Dr Deveny stressed “The ABS data amplifies the concerns raised during our conversations with everyday Australians. People who are already experiencing disadvantage are those who are hardest hit by the rising cost of access to healthcare.”

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