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Primary health care reform: What Primary Health Care Organisations can deliver

**AGPN National Forum: 4-6 November
Connecting care: Big ideas/Local solutions**

As part of the drive to reform Australia's health system, Primary Health Care Organisations (PHCOs), or "Medicare Locals" as described by the Federal Government, will become a reality for the general public as PHCOs change the functions and ambitions of the primary health care sector, said the Chair of the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN), Dr Emil Djakic.

In the lead up to AGPN's National Forum in Perth, in which the future of PHCOs will be a key theme, Dr Djakic said that while PHCOs themselves may not be immediately obvious to the public, the impact of PHCOs' work will be felt directly through the better coordinated care people will start to receive, and the filling of health service gaps in areas where they have long been wanting.

"Right now we have patients negotiating a fractured, disjointed health system that can leave patients bewildered as to where to go and what to do next. They have to work their way through a maze of different public, private, state and federal organisations and all too often fall through the cracks between the different systems," Dr Djakic said.

"Under a PHCO, users will encounter a better connected and better flowing system that will coordinate the care they need and make sure they get the right care at the right place, at the right time," he said.

"There will be greater accountability as PHCOs will be charged with coordinating a health system that is accessible, equitable and flexible and that better provides for patients' needs. PHCOs will do this by looking at the needs of their community – their local population – using data to identify service and provider gaps in their regions and then developing ways to ensure that the local system responds to those needs.

"For example, PHCOs might identify that their community has a high level of heart disease and diabetes and a high proportion of the community is overweight. If waiting lists to see dieticians are long and there are very few affordable exercise programs in the area, it's the PHCO's job to find ways to address these needs and help people in their community access the nutrition and exercise services they require for better health.

"PHCOs are about keeping patients out of hospital and well in the community. They are about ensuring a primary health care system that helps *prevent* chronic disease and that effectively manages existing conditions, rather than relying on hospitals as a supposedly easier option.

"PHCOs will be able to keep track of population health issues, diseases and trends that will significantly improve the way health is delivered across the country," Dr Djakic said.

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