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Telehealth could finally achieve its potential

A major breakthrough in more equitable access to quality health care could be achieved with the introduction of Medicare for telehealth consultations, the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) said today.

Responding to today's announcement that a Gillard Government would introduce from July next year \$250m over four years for Medicare rebates for telehealth, AGPN Chair Dr Emil Djakic said this would enable telehealth to finally realise its long-promised potential.

"Online telehealth technology – the ability to diagnose and treat people from a distance – has existed for a long time: what's been absent up until now has been the willingness and capacity to pay for it," Dr Djakic said.

"Funding for GPs, other primary health carers and specialists to participate in telehealth measures, will facilitate an expansion in the use of this technology. It will enable access to state-of-the-art care, particularly for those living in rural and remote areas and in outer metropolitan areas, where currently access to services is inequitable.

"Online telehealth has the potential to overcome many of the barriers to care which are caused by current workforce shortages combined with the challenges of supporting people in the communities in which they live."

Dr Djakic said the additional \$35m and \$50m for funding towards initiatives to provide rural/remote clinical training online and after hours videoconferencing respectively, are also welcome measures.

"Online telehealth opportunities will radically change the treatment programs for rural and remote patients suffering chronic diseases like diabetes or for those patients requiring greater and more immediate access for mental health treatments," Dr Djakic said.

"General practitioners and specialists have been lobbying for funding for patient consultations by telehealth or teleconferencing for more than 15 years. This new funding will give general practitioners and specialists a vast array of service opportunities that have been in the past limited due to the lack of funding support.

"However as with all major infrastructure and innovative models of health service, it's the ground-up approach to implementing these services and opportunities that will make these initiatives happen and that's where Australia's Primary Health Care Organisations (PHCOs) will be integral in helping to support and deliver this achievement.

"PHCOs will be best placed for implementing and training the health sector professionals to become technologically literate and savvy with the opportunities available to them," Dr Djakic said.

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