

Monday 14 February, 2011

Medicare Locals remove layers of bureaucracy to deliver more services

The Australian General Practice Network [AGPN] is pleased the Council of Australian Governments has recognised the significance of the primary health care reforms following the signing of the Heads of Agreement – National Health Reform and that the state and territory governments are determined to pursue the vision for Medicare Locals.

AGPN Chair, Dr Emil Djakic says increasing the number of Medicare Locals to be established in the first round which is to be fast-tracked, as announced by the Prime Minister Julia Gillard, and the additional support for after hours care shows COAG supports the trend for health care services to shift away from the hospital system and into the primary health care sector.

“Medicare Locals are not about additional public servants or duplicating services, they’re about removing layers of bureaucracy. Medicare Locals will empower local networks of partners, providers and services to better organise themselves to work together to develop better services and to better target health spending to best meet the needs of their communities,” Dr Djakic said.

“The evidence is clear: a primary health care system of local, community based care organised and resourced in this way will have immediate benefits for people and make the entire health system work more efficiently and cost-effectively,” he said.

“That is why it is so important for Medicare Locals to be at the centre of improvement in health service delivery moving the hospital sector to its rightful place – an important but last port of call outside of emergencies.

“Medicare Locals are about planning local health services that are right for the populations’ profile and right for the health care service demands including advocating for local communities.

“When it is needed, Medicare Locals will provide or fund services to meet identified gaps and priorities. For example ensuring access to after hours services will be a priority as will providing new services where access to Medicare-funded services are deficient.

“They will be about more than good care and treatment in the community. These local bodies will also coordinate and promote preventive health programs that will target local populations to keep communities healthier and away from hospital treatment services longer.

“Over the coming months, the General Practice Network will be re-configuring its primary care programs and health services to establish Medicare Locals that will oversee the primary health care services for local and regional areas,” Dr Djakic said.

“Australia has been behind the eight-ball on primary health care compared to the progressive primary care services on offer around the world. Finally with the establishment of Medicare Locals, communities will over time realise the shift from relying on hospitals to focussing on the primary health care sector will be the ‘standard’ rather than the alternative,” Dr Djakic said.

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The implementation of Medicare Locals is geared to support and amplify many of the existing and highly successful local and national primary health care programs such as:

- psychological care sessions through the Access to Psychological Services Program (ATAPS)
- Barwon Victoria's Headspace program – Australia's Youth Mental Health Foundation – for mental health care plans
- the Nursing in General Practice program which supports practices to recruit and educate practice nurses
- a Street Doctor outreach service to deliver health care to marginal populations including homeless people, refugees, and Indigenous people
- Access to Aged Care Initiative (ACAI).
- greater access for Australia's Indigenous population to more affordable medicines under the 'Closing the Gap' PBS Co-Payment Measure
- a Lifestyle Modification Program –a six month healthy lifestyle education program
- the Cultural Mentors program - to support new rural and remote GPs including Aboriginal Cultural Awareness and local issues education
- a model for addressing the rural workforce shortage. This includes forging links between secondary schools and careers advisors, rural health clubs and GPs to expose rural students to the benefits of pursuing careers in rural health.

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