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Radical change to Australia's health system is long overdue

Countless people will continue to suffer and die needlessly unless Australia makes radical changes to its health system, Australian General Practice Network CEO David Butt said today.

On the eve of the release of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission's interim report, Mr Butt urged the Commissioners and the Federal Government not to 'wimp out' of transforming the health system to one that is recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as "world's best practice."

"World's best practice has been identified by the WHO as a health system led by primary health care – where the focus is on health promotion, illness prevention, early intervention, and acute and chronic disease management in the community," Mr Butt said.

"Too much of the focus of the Australian health system is on the hospital sector yet ironically we increase pressure on our hospitals by not creating a strong, integrated primary health care sector built around general practice.

In Australia, every year some 700,000 people undergo potentially preventable hospitalisations*. The national and international evidence is clear that many chronic diseases resulting in serious illness and premature deaths – diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, for example – can be either prevented or better managed through primary health care.

"Indigenous health inequalities, poor access for rural and remote residents and increasing hospitalisation of the chronically ill are all symptoms of the wrong balance in our health system.

"The Reform Commission has a rare opportunity to improve health care for all Australians, and that opportunity needs to be seized. Yes, hospitals and specialists are important, but primary health care – the care you get from your GP and others in the care team – results in better access, better health outcomes and happier people," he said.

Mr Butt said a single level of government should take responsibility for primary health care funding to end blame shifting, which results in fragmented and disconnected services and detracts from the central issue of what's best for the patient. He is also in favour of a regional approach to health care delivery, where local solutions suit local population health needs.

"It's health care delivery based on health care need. The population of Cape York has very different needs to that of Neutral Bay in Sydney and we need to be responsive to that," he said.

"The transition won't be easy, it will be a long process, but it's important. If we want to ensure hospitals have adequate capacity for when patients do need acute care, we need to make sure primary health care is keeping patients who don't need to be in hospitals, out of them," he said.

**Australian Hospital Statistics 2006-07, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*

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