

18 April 2010

Brinksmanship may tip health system over the edge

The continued obstinacy of state and territory premiers may risk Australia's best chance to address the widening gap in health services access and outcomes facing the country, says Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) Chair Dr Emil Djakic.

Dr Djakic said bickering over money could push the health system past the 'tipping point' Dr Christine Bennett talked about when she launched the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission final report: A healthier future for all Australians.

"The premiers will have to face their state and territory electorates on Tuesday and explain that they know better than the expert groups who submitted to and participated in, the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission process.

"They will have to stand up and say: 'our GST revenue is more important than the health of Australians'. And when the health system fails – and it will – they will have to put their hands up and admit they were warned, but when the opportunity arose to fix it, they failed," he said.

Doctors are often opposed to change, but the overwhelming majority of General Practitioners (GPs) in Australia support health reform. The 2009 Commonwealth Fund survey showed 71 percent of Australian GPs surveyed said the health system needed fundamental reform.

"What GPs like me, who are in the privileged position to be part of their patients' lives, know is that it's a jungle out there in the health system. People who have ongoing illnesses have to negotiate through systems which don't speak to each other and health care professionals who don't always work together well.

"As much as we try to help our patients through this process, it is a drain on resources and a drag on our patients who have to be quite committed to get from the system everything it promises them," Dr Djakic said.

He said AGPN supported the reforms put forward by the Rudd Government so far and his fundamental message to tomorrow's Council of Australian Governments meeting is for primary health care to be endorsed as central to the Australian health system.

"Without that, we will fail. Evidence tells us that primary health care – built around general practice – is the most effective health care and will save lives and reduce unnecessary and often painful hospitalisations," he said.

Dr Djakic said promised announcements about mental health care needed to be part of the package – and these too needed to recognise general practice's role.

"Depression and anxiety are the leading mental illnesses in this country. They are also almost exclusively diagnosed and treated in general practice. Taking mental health out of the health reform process is not only foolish, but hazardous," he said.

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