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Additional Medicare Locals risky

The Australian General Practice Network [AGPN] says the Prime Minister Julia Gillard's decision to potentially increase the number of Medicare Locals runs the risk of reducing their efficiency and effectiveness in delivering responsive, integrated services to the community.

AGPN Chair, Dr Emil Djakic, said the Prime Minister's vision for primary health care is welcome but changes to the number of Medicare Locals is effectively 'one step forward, two steps back' in the reform process.

"More Medicare Locals or primary health care organisations will only reduce the economies of scale and the capacity of Medicare Locals to deliver their services and potentially clutter rather than streamline the system," Dr Djakic said.

"While we welcome the Prime Minister's determination to shift the centre of gravity of the health system from hospitals to the primary health care sector, which matches the recommendations of the primary health care strategy, *Building a 21st Century Primary Health Care System*, more Medicare Locals are not necessary.

"The decision to fast track the establishment of Medicare Locals and to double the number of Medicare Locals in the first round from 15 to 30 within the next 12 months is the right decision.

"General Practice Networks across the country are collaborating with others and are now on the cusp of becoming Medicare Locals. They can deliver the Government's primary health care reforms in a timely and efficient way. However, re-jigging the Medicare Local map at this late stage will potentially frustrate a network that is virtually 90 percent of the way there.

"Regardless of the announcements for the primary health care sector, AGPN is urging leaders at this weekend's Council of Australian Government's meeting to share in the Prime Minister's vision to deliver the locally coordinated care that communities need," Dr Djakic said.

"COAG must not allow the primary health care reforms to get bogged down in the hospital and acute sector financing arrangements – allow the primary health care sector to get on with the job of reforming.

"The primary health care reforms that are set to deliver Medicare Locals will provide the infrastructure and systems to improve the health outcomes of local communities."

"Medicare Locals have been designed to:

- improve patient access to general practice and to integrate more primary health care services within local communities
- improve the management of chronic conditions to reduce the rate of avoidable hospital admissions
- improve health care within the home and community settings, including after hours services
- increase preventive health programs to improve the population health of local communities

- upgrade the quality, safety, performance and accountability of the primary health care sector.

“Medicare Locals will link the variety of allied health professionals, nurses and other carers with general practice to provide a system of health care that will streamline and tailor a patient’s experience in the primary health care sector.

“Australia can no longer afford to have the primary health care sector treated as the ‘poor cousin’ to the hospital sector: instead COAG has an opportunity to let this sector mature to become the dominant health system that will alleviate the increasingly costly hospital sector and to take the pressure off the over-burdened hospital system,” Dr Djakic said.

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