

Health budget includes welcome consumer focus

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Record funding for hospitals from 2020 and a \$5 billion rise for aged care are contained in a Federal Budget which also provides for more consumer-focused approaches to care and research.

Hospital funding will include \$100 million for innovation in providing hospital services aimed at bringing down avoidable admissions, including through better coordinated primary and transitional care.

“This is a welcome measure that will leverage co-investment from the states and recognises that hospital reform must be about so much more than simply investing in more beds,” Leanne Wells, the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, said.

“The scope to look at models of care that involve specialist hospital providers working in innovative ways outside of the hospital walls and better integrating with primary and community health services is an exciting, patient-friendly prospect that should be actively pursued with this funding.

“We also welcome greater consumer focus in the sharply increased medical research funding which will include \$150.4 million over four years from the Medical Research Future Fund to support better translation of research into better patient care.

“It is appropriate that this measure includes a pledge that consumers will have a role in helping to identify research priorities, a move we have supported for some years. We welcome that research focus as it is likely to mean that Australians can benefit more quickly from research which can be translated into more effective treatment and better care,” Ms Wells said.

“We also welcome the commitment to explore consumer-driven research – so often research is investigator driven when there are benefits to be gained in health system research agendas that are co-designed by clinicians, consumers and researchers.

“In aged care, the provision of 20,000 more high level home care packages for older people to remain in their own homes and receive the support services they require is a step in the right direction that will go some way meet the expanding demand for home-based care,”

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“People want to remain in their own homes and prefer home care. Add to that the fact that it is often more cost-effective for the individual and for government and it makes good sense to increase the number of places.

“Poor health literacy and difficulty understanding the health and aged care system can be a major barrier to access for many older Australians. Bolstering the home care packages with navigators helps ensure older Australians living at home get maximum benefit out of other supports available to them in the community.

“Change is constant in health care and we are seeing the consequences of this with changes to payments for different services flowing from the Medicare Benefits Schedule review. This will mean new payments for some diagnostic services while others will no longer be eligible for Medicare benefits.

“The review is identifying areas of unmet need for evidence-based new therapies while delisting those therapies for which there is insufficient evidence.

“There will be increases in funding for mental health services. We particularly welcome the support for the critical services provided by Lifeline and to better support people discharged from hospital after a suicide attempt. That this funding will be directed through Primary Health Networks to implement will ensure integration with the work PHNs are doing on mental health stepped care.

“Attention to promoting good infant and maternal health is long overdue. This Budget contains a raft of measures designed to address this, including significant measures such as \$241m for the spinal muscular atrophy drug Spinraza for the infants and the additional funding to make whooping cough immunisations available for pregnant women.

“While the additional funding for hospitals, Medicare, aged care and medicines is welcome, there is a strong case for greater emphasis on primary health care that focuses on local health services to respond to local need for integrated care, particularly for chronic illness.

“There are some very good down payments such as the Workforce Incentive Program that will enable general practices in all locations to strengthen team-based multi-disciplinary primary care by employed non-dispensing pharmacists and allied health providers. However longer-term primary health care reforms must remain on the radar as part of keeping Medicare up to date. We remain concerned about people’s ability to access the care they need because of expense as demonstrated by our recent Out of Pocket Pain survey.

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“We are disappointed that the Government has not taken up the many calls for a national obesity strategy. This is the number one preventable public health challenge for Australia.

“A comprehensive obesity strategy should include curbs on the exposure of children under 16 to promotion of unhealthy food and drink marketing, strengthen the healthy food star rating system and fund a comprehensive national plan to promote routine physical activity and public transport use,” Ms Well said.

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