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TELEHEALTH EXTENSION WELCOME BUT PERMANENT SYSTEM NEEDED

The Government's decision to extend Medicare-funded telehealth for GPs and non-GP specialists until the end of the year is welcome but is a missed opportunity to enshrine telehealth as a permanent feature of the Australian health system in a form which has greatest benefit for our vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities, AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, said today.

The AMA had previously called for the extension of all existing COVID telehealth items through until the end of the year.

"The existing COVID telehealth items were designed specifically to respond to the pandemic, which, as the recent lockdown in Perth illustrates, is far from over," Dr Khorshid said.

"COVID will continue to be a threat until the vaccine rollout is largely completed, which is not expected to be until the new year.

"The COVID telehealth items were always temporary, and the Government has consistently signalled that it wants to work with the profession on a long-term, sustainable model that is suited to more normal times.

"The AMA remains in important discussions with Government, emphasising that both short term COVID as well as permanent arrangements must ensure telehealth remains accessible for those who benefit from it most, including hard-to-reach groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients, nursing home residents, rural and remote patients and those with mental illness.

"The temporary extension signals that the Government intends preferencing video over telephone services for patients, with only limited telephone GP consultation items available from July. The impact of this change on those vulnerable communities with limited or no access to appropriate technology or internet is being made clear in our discussions with Government.

"The advent of telehealth has been a silver lining to the COVID pandemic. Access to telehealth during the pandemic has opened the eyes of the community to its benefits: increasing their access to health care. However, while in the longer term the profession wants to see much greater use of video telehealth, if the Government takes this approach to a permanent model of telehealth for general practice, there is no doubt that those patients who are very reliant on the telephone will be disadvantaged.

"The AMA will continue to work towards finalising permanent telehealth arrangements with Government as a matter of urgency, in a form that has the greatest benefits for patients, so that the profession and patients have certainty going forward."

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