

Parties promise to lower healthcare costs, but primary health care reform is missing in action

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The Consumers Health Forum welcomes recent announcements from both major parties that the cost of prescriptions will be eased by reducing the PBS co-payment. In addition, both parties have committed to raising the threshold for access to the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card (CSHC).

Consumers Health Forum CEO, Leanne Wells, said that these two measures will help to bring down costs for people on fixed incomes in the face of rising inflation pressures.

“Commitments to lower the cost of prescriptions if either side wins the election will be a much needed saving for health care consumers. **When medicines become unaffordable, the costs to the nation’s healthcare system becomes more burdensome, as people are missing essential treatment,**” said Ms Wells.

The Coalition have pledged to reduce the maximum patient medicine co-payment to \$32.50, and Labor’s pledge is to reduce it to a flat \$30.

“Likewise, the commitment by both parties to expand access to the Commonwealth Seniors Health Care Card will help a larger group of older Australians access cheaper health care and medication”.

“However, we remind both parties that there are many others in the community such as young people, those who have had their NDIS packages cut, and people living in poverty on Jobseeker for whom access to affordable healthcare is dire. Measures to support their capacity to access healthcare are sorely needed”.

“CHF would like see more health care affordability measures directed to people on low incomes, who need it most,” she said.

“We are acutely aware that many families in Australia will be forgoing items in the household budget to make ends meet,” said Ms Wells, “but affordability and access to healthcare goes beyond the cost of medicines.”

Seeing your GP and accessing specialist care are also costing Australians more, and many people are worried that they will not be able to afford the health care they need.

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Consumers shaping health

In a recent [survey on the sentiment of health care consumers](#), 14% of those surveyed said they could not pay for healthcare or medicines because of cost, and 30% said they were not confident they could afford the healthcare they needed if they became seriously ill.

“Primary health care reform is urgently needed if the health care system is to keep performing to the standards Australians want and expect. We call on the parties to commit to funding and implementing the [10 Year Primary Health Care Plan](#),” said Ms Wells.

“As the Lancet Global Health Commission has said, we need to spend more and spend better on primary health care” she said.

“Savings, flexibility, and better health outcomes can be achieved if the new government acts on and funds the recommendations in the 10 Year Plan and moves to invest in holistic primary health care.”

Ms Wells said that the Plan was developed after extensive consultation with consumers and professional associations, such as doctors, nurses and pharmacists, researchers and other stakeholders.

“The directions set in the Plan for primary health care sustainability, improvement and innovation have an unprecedented level of support among these groups. It is rare in health policy to see such alignment.”

This can be achieved with a staged implementation over a 2-5-10 year outlook, starting with:

- Increases in Medicare rebates and continuing indexation – so that patients who are not bulk-billed have reduced out-of-pocket costs and reduced barriers to seeing their GP
- Voluntary patient registration combined with additional blended payments to general practices – so that they have the flexibility to offer enhanced services by bolstering multidisciplinary team-based care and build the experience of a single health care destination
- Introduce a social prescribing scheme – so that consumers can be referred to non-medical social and community-based services to assist them to self-manage their conditions and protect against the negative health effects of experiences such as loneliness
- accelerated collaboration between Primary Health Networks and local hospital networks – so that consumers experience smoother transitions and better coordinated care between primary care, hospitals, and other services such as aged care.

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“Unless we make fundamental changes to the way we deliver primary healthcare in Australia now, the future will be bleak for many.”

“CHF is seeking major leadership and announcements in primary health care reform as we head into the last stretch before the election,” said Ms Wells.

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