

Budget sees progress in some areas of health – misses the opportunity in others

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Tonight's Federal Budget serves as a placeholder in what could have been a landmark year for health reforms.

The Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) recognises some strides made in health care sectors, yet crucial opportunities to deliver comprehensive, affordable, and accessible healthcare were overlooked.

CHF is very happy to see the PBS indexation frozen. The freeze is for five years for pensioners and health care card holders, while everyone else will receive a further 12-month freeze.

“We know that consumers want more affordable access to their medications, and it is pleasing to see that tonight’s Budget delivers on this, it is a win for consumers,” said CHF CEO Dr Elizabeth Deveny.

CHF also acknowledges that the government plans to deliver some extra financial help with rebates for power bills and a slight increase in rental assistance for some people but notes that the rates of most other welfare payments, including NewStart, have not been increased.

“We strongly believe that the rate of NewStart and other welfare payments must be increased, so people relying on these payments can keep up with the cost of living and simply afford to live – which includes their healthcare costs,” said Dr Deveny.

Ricki, a consumer living with complex health conditions said “While tonight’s budget provides some rental support, it still forces me to make a tough decision between paying my rent and adequately managing my healthcare needs. I live with complex health needs and every dollar counts for me. It's

great that some of my payments are going up, but I'm not left with much money left over at the end of the week.

The government has announced that a further 29 extra Medicare Urgent Care Clinics are set to open. Consumers are generally supportive of the idea of the clinics, but CHF is mindful that they are not the entire solution to consumers having better access to primary care.

“We fully acknowledge that Medicare Urgent Care Clinics have a role to play and it is great to see another 29 opening. They will make a difference to their local communities.

“What we have heard anecdotally is that some consumers are having trouble accessing the care they need at these clinics and some clinics are reverting to a bookings system, which does away with the walk-in nature,” said Dr Deveny.

CHF is disappointed that the Budget has not funded ways that people can upskill their own health literacy. It hasn't improved consumers access or affordability to dental care. While there are some initiatives to make mental health care access better, more still needs to be done to make it cheaper for people to see a psychologist.

“Having better access to dental care is really important to me. I'm currently missing out on dental care simply because of the cost and I'm disappointed to see that there haven't been any measures included in tonight's Budget,” said Ricki.

The Budget's focus on helping women and making elements of their healthcare more affordable and accessible are welcome.

Ella, a mother of three children, who also cares for other family members said, “I'm really happy to see the government have a dedication to women's health in this Budget. I think many of the measures are important and a step in the right direction.

Overall, I feel that the budget just doesn't do enough to make a real, tangible difference for women. I'm a mum of three kids, often struggling to get by, and I don't quite see the benefits to me in this Budget.

CHF is very appreciative for the \$500,000 viability funding the Federal Government has provided in tonight's Budget. The funding will help CHF continue to advocate for the needs of Australian healthcare consumers.

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