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## Recommendations

- 1. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF \$8 million over 4 years to identify, train and support 100 new health consumers to represent the consumer voice at decision making bodies relating to health policy, research, service design and delivery.**
- 2. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF to coordinate the development of consumer training, support and resourcing to improve the engagement of the consumer voice in the areas of health research and therapeutic goods.**
- 3. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF \$600,000 across 4 years for biannual consumer healthcare conference and awards.**
- 4. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF \$6 million over 4 years, to lead a multiyear cross sector collaborative which seeks to improve the working relationship and experience between consumers and practitioners.**
- 5. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF \$5 million during FY 2024/25 to run the Understanding Medicare – understanding your health community education sessions across Australia.**
- 6. The Commonwealth Government to adjust its health funding formula to include investment in measures that help educate Australians about the health policy or program being created/implemented.**
- 7. The Commonwealth Government provide funding to CHF to ensure consumer participation and support for the Government's *First 2000 Days/Women's Health initiative*.**
- 8. The Commonwealth Government to develop a funded Implementation Plan for the *National Health Literacy Strategy*.**
- 9. The Commonwealth Government commit to the package of five recommendations of the National Oral Health Alliance**
  - a. provide at least \$500 million additional funding for public dental services.**
  - b. implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality & Safety and the recommendations of the Senate Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia.**
  - c. provide funding to develop and implement a new ten-year Australian National Oral Health Plan.**
  - d. appoint a Chief Dental and Oral Health Officer.**
  - e. develop and implement a health levy on sugar sweetened beverages.**

- 10. The Commonwealth Government to investigate and research how a tiered subsidised financial model of allied health care could work to make allied health care more affordable and accessible to consumers who most need the care but can least afford it.**
- 11. The Commonwealth Government to expand the Strengthening Medicare reform program to increase the accessibility and affordability of all primary care services to consumers.**
- 12. The Commonwealth Government bring forward Tranche 3 of the 60 Day prescribing approved medications, to commence on 1 July 2024.**
- 13. The Commonwealth Government remove the automatic CPI indexation of PBS consumer co-payments for concessional patients.**
- 14 The Commonwealth Government invest upgrading the IT infrastructure for the PBS Safety Net to integrate with MyHealthRecord and allow for consumers to be automatically given Safety Net pricing upon reaching the threshold.**
- 15. The Commonwealth Government conduct an evidence-based review of the cost-effectiveness, sustainability and affordability of all Community Pharmacy Agreement programs and services.**
- 16. The Commonwealth Government to fund a mental health coaching/talk therapy program to help more people access the mental health support they need.**
- 17. The Commonwealth Government review the Better Access initiative to better support people with medium to high mental health care needs.**
- 18. The Commonwealth Government to continue to fund telehealth services with a longer-term focus to provide Australians with certainty.**

## Our approach to this submission

The Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) believes that healthcare in Australia must be accessible, affordable and safe. The prolonged rise in the cost-of-living has seen many Australians unable to keep up with the costs of their healthcare, which has resulted in many consumers reporting they are delaying seeking care. We know that when care is delayed it often results in poorer health outcomes for people and can also see people depend more on presenting to hospitals for emergency medicine.

A country like Australia must make sure that its citizens can receive healthcare, when and where they need it.

While accessibility, affordability and safety are all important pillars of the Australian healthcare system, so too is fairness. People's ability to access and afford healthcare should not be dependent on their bank balance or their postcode, we are confident this is something all Australians can agree on.

The themes of accessibility, affordability, safety and equity are the core principles which CHF's budget submission for 2024-25 have been developed. CHF is calling on the government, through the next federal budget, to help empower consumers to advocate their needs in the health system, help consumers understand their health and help consumers afford their healthcare.

In addition to ensuring people have access to the care they need CHF believes the system needs to move to be consumer centred with consumers given the tools and information to enable them to be partners in their care.

Consumers also need to be assisted to navigate the health system. Often, we hear from consumers that they didn't know a service existed or help was available. Consumer centric support to link consumers with the services they need will help people overcome an access barrier to the care they need.

2024 will be the 40<sup>th</sup> birthday of Medicare. Australians can rightly be proud of our universal healthcare insurance scheme funded by taxpayers. CHF remains committed to the original ethos of Medicare to ensure that those Australians who need healthcare can access the care they need. Medicare's birthday provides an opportunity for the Australian community to reflect on how Medicare has improved access, affordability and equity to the way healthcare is provided in Australia. It also provides an opportunity to further educate the community on the current Medicare system and how it can help lower people's cost-of-living through the existing scheme.

Climate change and the wider implication of that change is one of the big policy issues of our time. We know that the changing climate is impacting people's health. We also know that we all need to do more to reduce emissions, including the health sector.

The impacts climate change has on people's health is something that is frequently raised with us. It also seems to be an area that the wider Australian community is thinking and interested in. This interest and the need to act is not going away. Consumers want to know what governments, clinicians and consumers can do to build health resilience as the climate continues to change.

CHF welcomes the Australian Government's recent National Health and Climate Strategy. While climate change as it relates to healthcare is not a direct budget ask from CHF this year, we support any government and sector efforts to rollout the national strategy in a meaningful way.

## Part 1 – Helping consumers to advocate their needs in the health system

### Strengthening the consumer movement

When consumers can advocate for their needs in the health system, we know it results in better service design, delivery and uptake. The Australian healthcare sector in Australia agrees that involving consumers in decision making of healthcare policy and program design is a good thing.

To ensure that consumers voices will be heard when decisions which will impact the type of healthcare they will receive are being made, CHF recommends that the government funds it to support 100 consumers across Australia. The funding will help CHF properly train these consumers on health-related issues and systems on a local, state and federal level. The funding would also allow for CHF to assist trained consumers to apply for relevant consumer positions on working groups, committees and management boards and provide ongoing support during their terms.

CHF will work to ensure that consumers selected are reflective of the Australian population and will make sure the 100 consumers cover priority communities across Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, LGBTIQ+, multicultural Australia, youth etc) while also guaranteeing representation based on population trend and geography. CHF will utilise its existing education pathways (including its members) to train the consumers.

#### **Recommendation:**

- 1. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF \$8 million over 4 years to identify, train and support 100 new health consumers to represent the consumer voice at decision making bodies relating to health policy, research, service design and delivery.**

Two key health areas with a focused need for improved consumer engagement are medical research and therapeutic goods.

Many research projects attempt to have a consumer representative as part of their project team and governance structure to ensure the project meets community needs and standards; however, it can be difficult finding consumers with the skills to effectively contribute to such projects. Consumers who do fill these roles are often isolated with ad-hoc training and support, limiting their capacity to impact research directly in project groups but indirectly such as through result presentations at conferences.

Therapeutic goods are an area that can have a major impact on consumer health through medicines and medical devices, for both good and ill. As such it is critical that the consumer voice impacts the priorities and decisions of their regulation and management through the TGA. However therapeutic goods are a complex area that often requires heavy resourcing to be accessible to consumers. As such funding should be made available to CHF through the TGA to allow for consumers to be effectively engaged, trained and supported to provide input into TGA processes and decisions. This would include developing training resources for consumers wishes to engage with therapeutic goods and the TGA and facilitating consumer input for TGA consultations.

#### **Recommendation:**

- 2. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF to coordinate the development of consumer training, support and resourcing to improve the engagement of the consumer voice in the areas of health research and therapeutic goods.**

## Promote best practice consumer advocacy through an annual conference and award program

To promote best practice consumer engagement and advocacy across the sector, CHF seeks funding to establish a biannual conference to share and promote best practice consumer engagement and advocacy. This would be a conference led by consumer advocates for consumer advocates and aim to be accessible for all attendees. Unlike many conferences which are designed to raise funds through registrations the aim would be to maximise consumer participation with a mix of free- and heavily subsidised places and travel bursaries

Government funding would be augmented with sponsorship from a range of sources consistent with CHF's values and policies.

The conference will also be used as an awards ceremony where CHF can recognise leading consumers, organisations and health collaborations which are creating better outcomes for consumers and creating best-practice consumer health examples for others in the sector to learn from.

### **Recommendation:**

#### **3. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF \$600,000 across 4 years for biannual consumer healthcare conference and awards.**

## Bringing consumers, clinicians and social service providers together to better consumer's experience and health outcomes

The belief in the person-centered model of care is now largely accepted and utilized, to varying degrees, in Australian healthcare.

While practitioners and governments may agree to the principles of consumer engagement, consumers and practitioners commonly come up against barriers fully implementing this model of care. The '*why we should do this*' is understood but the '*how we do this*' is not.

For people who frequently use the health care system, like people living with a chronic condition, what we find is that where their healthcare is managed well, it is because they have a great working relationship with their GP, their allied health practitioners, pharmacists and other health professionals and that these relationships empower the consumer to make informed decisions. Aiding this is the health practitioners also working constructively together regarding their patient's condition.

The above scenario is what CHF considers to be the best-practice person-centred model of care in practice. This is the experience CHF wants all Australians to have with their health practitioners. It is important to remember that not all consumers enjoy this best-practice experience with their current practitioners, which is often for a variety of reasons.

Where the relationship is not working well for the consumer, it can often become a barrier for people to continue to engage with the healthcare they need, when they need it. This in turn results in worse outcomes for the patient, practitioner and ultimately the healthcare system, particularly if consumers put off getting healthcare, they can later present back to the healthcare system sicker, needing more care which usually results in higher cost healthcare.

CHF wants to lead a sector collaborative project which brings together consumers, consumer organisations, practitioner organisations and other social service providers who work with

consumers and practitioners to improve the working relationship between consumers and practitioners. In doing this, our hope is that it will lead to more efficient and less costly healthcare being produced, while also improving the experience and clinical outcomes of consumers.

**Recommendation:**

**4. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF \$6 million over 4 years, to lead a multiyear cross sector collaborative which seeks to improve the working relationship and experience between consumers and practitioners.**

## Part 2 – Helping consumers understand their health

### Community education - Understanding Medicare – understanding your health

CHF believes it is vitally important for Australian consumers to be given the opportunity to understand their own health and what they can do to improve it. For this to happen, health literacy information must be developed and provided to community. We know that through using preventative health approaches, like increased health literacy, helps improve a community's overall health and helps lower presentations for non-urgent medical care.

CHF believes it is important to explain to consumers how they can utilise the current health and Medicare system to their advantage. Knowledge is power and our hope is that by educating people on how the current system can already help them it will also result in people taking more active steps in seeking the healthcare they need and taking preventative steps to improve their health.

To coincide with Medicare's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, CHF is proposing to run community education sessions titled *Understanding Medicare – understanding your health*. These sessions will be facilitated by CHF and help provide health literacy information which empowers consumers to better their own health outcomes themselves using the current services (including Medicare) available.

We know across the country many consumers are reporting the cost-of-living as being a key barrier to getting the healthcare they need; this is particularly being felt in peri-urban areas. CHF proposes to prioritise peri-urban areas of the major capital cities as priority destinations to roll out the *Understanding Medicare – understanding your health* sessions. We want to help people in these areas understand what they can do themselves to improve their health, particularly if money and the cost-of-living pressures are affecting their ability to fully engage with their health.

#### Recommendation

**5. The Commonwealth Government fund CHF \$5 million during FY 2024/25 to run the Understanding Medicare – understanding your health community education sessions across Australia.**

### Improving health literacy rates in Australia

CHF supports the Commonwealth Government's commitment to a universal health system. However, many factors stand in the way of equitable access. Australia's healthcare system is world class, yet it is also very difficult to navigate and privileges those who speak English, live in capital cities, and can afford to pay for their health services.

Australia spends billions on Medicare, medicines and more without a parallel investment that would ensure the equitable use of these taxpayer-funded health benefits. To rectify this, CHF urges the Commonwealth to rethink health funding formulas so there is always investment in measures that contribute to equitable access. Initiatives to improve access could include health literacy programs, service navigators, and self-care resources in multiple languages. Now more than ever Australians need practical support to keep themselves healthy and well. Investing in measures to help people take control of their own health will reduce unnecessary strain on the health system in future.

CHF is pleased to see the continuation of the Government's First 2000 Days/Women's Health initiative. This initiative is important to help provide Australian children with the best start to life, particularly through helping parents understand what they can do to help their child's development. CHF remains committed to working with the Commonwealth Government on this important initiative.

CHF also notes the recently released National Health Survey 2021-22 published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The survey shows that almost two thirds of adults and more than a quarter of children are overweight or obese. CHF supports the We support the Alliance's call for the government to implement policies and programs outlined in the National Obesity Strategy 2022-2032 to help Australian adults and children live healthier lives.

CHF is also aware that the Government is soon to release the National Health Literacy Strategy. This strategy is hugely important to lifting the rates of health literacy of Australians. Higher health literacy rates mean higher rates of people understanding and taking control of their health. While funding has been provided to produce the strategy, CHF believes it is essential for the Government to also fund the implementation of it, so that all Australians can know, use and benefit from the strategy, when it is released later in 2024.

**Recommendation:**

- 6. The Commonwealth Government to adjust its health funding formula to include investment in measures that help educate Australians about the health policy or program being created/implemented.**
- 7. The Commonwealth Government provide funding to CHF to ensure consumer participation and support for the Government's *First 2000 Days/Women's Health initiative*.**
- 8. The Commonwealth Government to develop a funded Implementation Plan for the *National Health Literacy Strategy*.**

## Part 3 – Helping consumers afford their healthcare

### Making dental care more affordable and accessible

As noted in the recently published final report by the Senate Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia, *A system in decay: a review into dental services in Australia*, Australia currently has a two-tiered system where half of all Australians simply do not have access to essential oral healthcare. Poor oral healthcare has devastating effects on both the individual and the wider community. Now is a critical time for the Commonwealth Government to take the lead on addressing the systemic failure of the current piecemeal approach.

As a member of the National Oral Health Alliance (NOHA), we repeat their call for funding for five immediate actions as a package. Firstly, an immediate commitment of at least \$500,000 per annum of increased funding for public dental services to help meet the backlog of demand for essential oral healthcare. Secondly implementing the oral healthcare recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, such as establishing a Senior Dental Benefit Scheme, and the recommendations of Senate Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia; as a clear pathway for resolving existing issues with oral healthcare. Thirdly, funding the development and implementation of a new National Oral Health Plan in collaboration with NOHA to build the pathway for improving our national oral healthcare system. Fourthly to appoint a Commonwealth Chief Dental and Oral Health Officer to oversee and coordinate these activities. And finally, to develop and implement a sugar sweetened beverage health levy to simultaneously fund the previous items while incentivising industry to reformulate their products to contain less sugar.

#### **Recommendation:**

#### **9. The Commonwealth Government commit to the package of five recommendations of the National Oral Health Alliance**

- a. provide at least \$500 million additional funding for public dental services.**
- b. implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality & Safety and the recommendations of the Senate Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia.**
- c. provide funding to develop and implement a new ten-year Australian National Oral Health Plan.**
- d. appoint a Chief Dental and Oral Health Officer.**
- e. develop and implement a health levy on sugar sweetened beverages.**

### Making it easier and more affordable for Australians to get the allied health care they need

For many Australians seeing an allied health professional greatly assists in maintaining their health or assisting in recovery. Consumers have for some time been reporting that while allied health does provide a benefit to them, the current funding model makes it unaffordable and for many out of reach. While the government's five free sessions for allied health does help some people access the care they need, generally it is not enough support to help consumers have ongoing relationships with their allied health providers. The current model relies on Australians being able to privately pay for allied health care services which highlights an equity issue.

CHF supports further investment which would see more Australians being able to afford allied health care through subsidised visits. We believe the subsidised visits should be provided on a tiered

approach so those most in need who can least afford it are able to access the allied health services they need. The subsidisation of the visits must reduce the fee gap to either a non-existent level or be tiered to match the financial situation of the consumer.

#### **Recommendation**

**10. The Commonwealth Government to investigate and research how a tiered subsidised financial model of allied health care could work to make allied health care more affordable and accessible to consumers who most need the care but can least afford it.**

#### **Helping Australians get the time they need with their primary care team**

Primary care is the backbone of the Australia healthcare system and the Strengthening Medicare reforms are a promising start to repairing the existing issues within primary care e.g. collapse of bulk billing making general practice increasingly inaccessible and unaffordable. To continue this progress, CHF believes that more primary care providers need to be integrated into the Medicare reform agenda, to allow for consumers to have improved access to all parts of the primary care system based on their individual needs e.g. longer appointments, more frequent appointments, appointments with multiple providers at once.

#### **Recommendation**

**11. The Commonwealth Government to expand the Strengthening Medicare reform program to increase the accessibility and affordability of all primary care services to consumers.**

#### **Making a trip to the pharmacist affordable/higher value**

Pharmacy continues to be a key component of everyday Australian's interaction with the health system, with recent research conducted by CHF finding that over 90% of consumers have visited a pharmacy in the last 12 months. However, this high reliance means that consumers are particularly vulnerable to cost of living pressures.

While the recent 60 Day Prescribing program is a positive first step towards helping consumers afford their medicines, more can be done. Starting with committing to bringing forward the final stage 3 tranche to start on 1 July 2024. Once all currently approved 60 day prescribing medications have been implemented, PBAC can then look at the remaining PBS listed medications for consideration for longer supply including up to 90 days of supply.

**12. The Commonwealth Government bring forward Tranche 3 60 Day prescribing approved medications to commence on 1 July 2024.**

The PBS is a critical program that is intended to keep medicines affordable, however in recent years two key gaps have emerged in the current system design. The first is the automatic CPI indexation of the consumer co-payment for PBS medicines, meaning that the out-of-pocket costs for medicines rises faster than consumer wages which leads to increased affordability of medicines. The second is the lack of automatic application of the PBS Safety Net pricing when a consumer reaches the threshold, where consumers unnecessarily continue to pay their full price for medicines even after reaching the threshold if neither they or their pharmacist manually calculate their spendings and register them for the safety net.

#### **Recommendation**

**14. The Commonwealth Government invest upgrading the IT infrastructure for the PBS Safety Net to integrate with MyHealthRecord and allow for consumers to be automatically given Safety Net pricing upon reaching the threshold.**

The Community Pharmacy Agreement is the primary funding avenue for many pharmacy services that are delivered to consumers and the community, some of which have out-of-pocket costs and some of which are free. However there has not been any evidenced based evaluation of the programs and services delivered through the CPA program to ensure they are cost-effective, sustainable and affordable for consumers. The Commonwealth government should commit to funding, whether as part of the CPA or independently, a full review of all the current programs and services delivered through the CPA to allow for evidence based, data driven decisions for delivering affordable pharmaceuticals healthcare to consumers.

**Recommendation**

**15. The Commonwealth Government conduct an evidence-based review of the cost-effectiveness, sustainability and affordability of all Community Pharmacy Agreement programs and services.**

[Helping people get the community-based mental health support they need](#)

Mental health support remains a highly utilised part of Australian healthcare. The need for Australians to access mental health support continues to grow. Mental Health Australia's recently released *Report to the Nation* which polled 2,000 consumers indicated that more than half (58%) said the rising cost of living is having a big impact on their mental health. The report also showed that 1 in 5 (21%) said cost was a barrier for them to receive the mental health support they needed.

CHF is also aware of the mental health workforce issues being faced across the country which has seen waiting lists for many mental health services in the community blow out between 6 and 12 months for most parts of Australia. CHF believes that innovation can be leveraged to better support all Australians get the mental health support they need, when they need it.

For instance, CHF is supportive of the Commonwealth Government funding a national low intensity support service to provide short-term mental health coaching/talk therapy. This is support that is easily available, would have no waiting lists and no requirement for a diagnosis or referral. It should be delivered via telephone or video initially and may include scope for face-to-face delivery overtime. CHF believes that health coaching/talk therapy must be derived from an evidence-based service model (e.g. Talking Therapies in UK) and be connected to a broader service system to support "step-up care" to more intensive services if required.

CHF is also supportive of calls to re-focus the Better Access initiative, so it supports people with medium to high mental health care needs, with redesigned service options for people with complex needs. The independent evaluation of the Better Access initiative found that people with severe and complex mental health conditions clearly benefit from Better Access and recommended that the additional 10 sessions introduced during the pandemic should continue to be made available and targeted towards people with complex mental health needs. The evaluation also found that Better Access does not always serve this cohort's needs optimally and should be supplemented by other multidisciplinary models that provide both longer-term intensive clinician care and holistic support.

**Recommendation**

**16. The Commonwealth Government to fund a mental health coaching/talk therapy program to help more people access the mental health support they need.**

**17. The Commonwealth Government review the Better Access initiative to better support people with medium to high mental health care needs.**

[Helping Australians continue to see their practitioners on telehealth](#)

Consumers have told us clearly, they like the options that telehealth provides them in accessing healthcare. Telehealth is now a highly utilised and generally accepted part of the way Australian healthcare is delivered and Australian consumers have an expectation that it will remain.

CHF believes that there is a place for government to continue to fund telehealth services so that consumers can continue to have healthcare access options. Consumers have told us that they want to see more practitioners offering telehealth services. CHF is supportive of any government measure which can allow for the expansion of telehealth services across the healthcare professions.

Because telehealth became mainstream through necessity during COVID lockdowns, it meant that the rules governing the use of telehealth services have regularly changed as circumstances changed and the country came out of lockdowns. The frequent rule changes have seen consumers want more certainty about how telehealth operates and what the rules are. CHF believes that the current governance settings are appropriate and should be in place for the next couple of years, when they should be evaluated to make sure they are still relevant and fit-for-purpose.

Telehealth, while useful, must not be looked to or used as a replacement for face-to-face consultations between consumers and their healthcare providers. Consumers, particularly in regional and rural parts of Australia tell us they worry that the expansion of telehealth will soon see their local health professional replaced by an iPad.

**Recommendation**

**18. The Commonwealth Government to continue to fund telehealth services with a longer-term focus to provide Australians with certainty.**