MEDIA RELEASE

Health consumers demand clear upfront costs and visible waitlists in specialist overhaul

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Australians are stuck navigating a fractured health system that forces them to travel long distances, spend hours chasing their own medical records, and confront costs that cause them to dip into their savings or skip care entirely, the Consumers Health Forum has warned.

Giving evidence to the parliamentary inquiry into access and affordability of medical specialists later today, CHF, the national peak body for health consumers, will outline the changes consumers say are needed to make specialist care more affordable, transparent, and equitable.

The evidence follows a series of in-depth interviews conducted by CHF with consumers who have experienced the specialist medical system to inform its submission and establish what would make the journey easier for people.

Consumers described waits running from weeks to years, with little visibility of where they sat in the queue, and costs that extend well beyond the specialist's fee to tests, imaging, procedures, travel, accommodation and time off work.

People move between the public and private systems depending on how urgent their condition is, how long the wait is and what they can afford. Fragmented care makes that harder, with consumers left chasing referrals, carrying their own records between clinicians, and arranging follow-up appointments that were delayed, lost or never made.

Consumers Health Forum CEO Dr Elizabeth Deveny said cost and delay were determining who got care and when.

“Too often we are asking consumers and families to supply both the coordination and the cash,” Dr Deveny said. One man in regional Victoria put the trade-off between waiting and paying simply. ‘With money. Then you’ve got choice.’

“People with more money, time, confidence, health literacy and family support can work around the gaps. People without them are more likely to be delayed, lost to follow-up or unable to push back on poor care. For people in regional, rural and remote Australia, distance compounds the cost.”

Describing what it takes to keep her own care moving between appointments, tests and clinics, one woman in regional Western Australia told us, ‘That scares me because I’m thinking if I wasn’t proactively managing my care, who would be?’ Too often the answer is no one.

“When people are sick, in pain or caring for a loved one, they should not have to become project managers of their own healthcare.”

CHF is calling on the Federal Government to consider five reforms to specialist care, including:

- Make referral and waiting pathways visible and accountable.
- Make the full cost of care clear before care begins across the whole episode rather than the first consultation.
- Strengthen continuity and coordination, so responsibility for the next step doesn’t default to consumers and carers.
- Reduce geographic inequity, with a stronger regional workforce, outreach services, telehealth where it’s clinically appropriate, and travel assistance that reflects what it really costs to get to care.
- Design reform around the whole consumer journey, across public and private care.

The submission can be read here.

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