MEDIA RELEASE

Half of Australians went without care they needed last year, survey finds

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Almost half of Australian adults went without healthcare they needed in the past year, rising to three in four among those under financial pressure, according to the Consumers Health Forum of Australia's 2026 National Consumer Sentiment Survey, released today.

The survey of 5,178 Australian adults found that while almost all adults (94.3%) used a health service during the year, just under half (49.5%) went without something they needed.

Key findings include:

- Cost is the most common reason people went without and was named by 67 per cent of those who put off dental care, close to half who did not fill a prescription, 41 per cent who skipped tests or treatment and 33 per cent who did not see a doctor.
- Over half of respondents (53%) believed they would receive safe, high-quality care if they became seriously ill but fewer than three in ten (29.6%) believed they could afford it, down from 32.3 per cent in 2025.
- Close to six in ten had delayed or avoided dental care and reported pain, difficulty eating and losing teeth. Nearly nine in ten respondents (89.1%) agree dental care should be considered part of the healthcare system.
- More than 90 per cent of people earning under $1,000 a week rated bulk billing as important to them, compared with fewer than eight in ten of those earning $4,000 or more.

CHF CEO Dr Elizabeth Deveny said the findings describe a health system splitting into two.

"We have a health system where there are the haves and the have-nots. The gap between them is where people are getting hurt," Dr Deveny said.

"Around half the country trusts the care they'd get if they fell seriously ill. Fewer than a third believe they could afford it, and that second number is going backwards.

“Healthcare decisions are made at the kitchen table and weighed against rent, groceries and everything else due that week. For a lot of people, choices are becoming impossible,” Dr Deveny said.

The survey found unmet need concentrated among the people already carrying the most. Around six in ten Australians aged under 55 went without care they needed, while women reported going without more often than men (52.8% compared with 45.6%) and delayed dental care more often (65.3% compared with 53%).

LGBTQIA+ respondents reported some of the poorest experiences across the survey, with 63.7 per cent going without care they needed, while consumers in rural and remote communities also reported poorer experiences on several measures.

The survey recorded progress elsewhere, with modest improvements reported in GP access, continuity of care and after-hours services.

“These figures are concerning, but also highlight the importance of the Government's significant boost to GP bulk billing,” Dr Deveny said.

“Without that investment, many more Australians could be facing barriers to accessing affordable primary care. The challenge now is building on that progress to address the ongoing pressures reflected in these results.

“Dental care is a shining example of the equity issue. While consumers overwhelmingly believe it should be part of Medicare, almost 60 per cent delayed or avoided dental care and experienced pain.

“But averages don’t tell you who is benefiting. The gains are flowing mostly to people who were already managing, while those carrying the heaviest load are making the same calculations they made three years ago.

“The voices of consumers must be at the forefront of health system reform. This report gives decision-makers an independent and well-rounded picture of exactly where the fairness gaps are widening.”

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