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Rural doctors back calls for telehealth consults in wake of COVID-19

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has backed calls for new Medicare rebates for emergency telehealth consultations, to enable people who suspect they may have coronavirus - or are in quarantine due to the virus - to consult their GPs remotely via phone or video-conferencing.

RDAA has commended Australia’s health ministers for agreeing to the measure at their recent meeting.

While the Federal Health Minister, Greg Hunt MP, is yet to formally announce the Medicare rebate and the details around it, RDAA has contacted the Minister’s office to back the measure.

“Given the concerns around COVID-19 impacting on remote Indigenous communities - and other rural and remote communities where there is a shortage of health professionals – providing urgent access to MBS rebated telehealth consultations is critical” RDAA President, Dr John Hall, said.

“Rural and remote communities already suffer with lower life expectancies and poorer health outcomes - these communities, especially our First Nations people and those with chronic disease, will be particularly vulnerable to the most severe form of COVID-19 with a likely higher death rate.”

“Supporting affected patients to access care and advice remotely from their GP, without having to visit the practice or a hospital in person, makes perfect sense.”

“The more we can keep patients with suspected coronavirus at home, and prevent the further spread of the virus, the better – and that is where telehealth can play a leading role.”

“Health authorities have already been recommending that people who suspect they have COVID-19 should call their general practice from home for further advice, rather than go into a health facility.”

“The introduction of an emergency telehealth item in the Medicare Benefits Schedule would make it much easier for those who suspect they may have COVID-19 – or who are in quarantine - to access the support and advice they need, while also ensuring they are minimising contact with others.”

“We believe the rebate should cover triage by clinicians at a patient’s regular practice, as they will have the patient’s full medical history and know of any co-morbidities or other health issues that might exacerbate their condition.”

“The patient’s GP can then determine the best course of action, and if it involves having the patient attend hospital, arrangements can be made in advance of the patient’s arrival there.”
“It will be crucial to ensure that the Medicare rebate covers telephone consults – not just video-conferencing – as this will make it much easier to use interpreters for patients who do not speak English well and/or who have come from overseas.”

“We urge the Federal Government to implement this rebate as soon as possible, and to widely promote access to the rebate, to ensure telehealth can be used to full effect in reducing the spread of COVID-19.”

“Significant planning and investment will also be required to protect rural and remote communities, with increased access to fixed wing and helicopter retrievals for the seriously unwell, due to the lack of Intensive Care beds and infrastructure in these areas.”

A high resolution photo of Dr John Hall is available here

Available for interview: RDAA President, Dr John Hall (via contacts below)

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