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AMA calls for telehealth funding extension as COVID-19 pandemic continues

The AMA today called on the federal government to extend patient access to Medicare funded COVID-19 telehealth services beyond June 30.

Under a decision taken by the former Government, from 1 July access to both GP and non-GP specialist telehealth services will be cut back, particularly telephone consultations.

AMA President Dr Omar Khorshid said patients cannot afford to lose access to COVID-19 telehealth as it will make access to medical care more difficult, particularly for vulnerable populations and those who might not have the access or skills to use other IT platforms.

“Broad access to Medicare funded telehealth services has been a key part of our pandemic response by reducing patients' exposure to the virus and helping people in self-isolation to access critical medical care,” Dr Khorshid said.

“Some patients are more vulnerable to the virus, particularly immuno-compromised people and older Australians. Public health orders also mean that many people are still required to self-isolate as they recover while close contacts are required to minimise movements in the community where possible.

“GPs and specialists also face continuing pressures to provide safe and accessible care for patients, and telehealth remains an integral part of practice.”

Dr Khorshid said the country was still in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic with tens of thousands of cases still being reported every day, hundreds of people hospitalised and a significant number of deaths.

“Last week the Commonwealth acknowledged the ongoing impact of COVID-19 by extending the COVID-19 National Partnership Agreement covering hospital funding until the end of year. Medicare funded COVID-19 telehealth services should be treated in the same way.”

Dr Khorshid said governments needed to be responsive to the ongoing situation and adapt as circumstances change.

“COVID-19 has shown repeatedly that it does not respect artificial deadlines. Our health response must continue to be flexible and recognise that current circumstances still demand broad access to telehealth services.

“Telehealth has been embraced by doctors and patients alike. Proceeding with the July changes will put more people at risk of contracting the virus and make it more difficult for patients to access the care they need.”

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