



RACGP



## AMA and RACGP call for urgent reinstatement of COVID-19 telehealth items

The Australian Medical Association and Royal Australian College of General Practitioners have asked federal Health Minister Mark Butler to meet with them to discuss the reinstatement of COVID-19 telehealth items cancelled on 1 July.

In letters to the Minister, the AMA and RACGP urged the Government to immediately reverse the decision to let the telehealth items lapse, saying the telephone is a safe and effective means of delivering essential care to all Australians, especially during the worsening pandemic.

“These changes undermine the ability of patients to access their doctors, and in particular for GPs to prescribe antivirals for COVID-positive patients and will lead to costs elsewhere in the health system, including in overstretched hospitals,” AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid said.

“This decision means telephone access to doctors will be significantly limited, hitting vulnerable patients hardest, including those who do not have access to high bandwidth internet and those who can’t operate the necessary IT systems.”

Dr Khorshid said the item for telephone consults longer than 20 minutes with a GP - a key part of the Government’s ‘Living with Covid’ strategy - was critical and must be restored.

“Prescribing antivirals is time consuming, requiring a GP to consider complex eligibility requirements, contraindications and drug interactions and then arrange for patients to obtain the medication while isolating. Even simple cases take thirty minutes to an hour to properly complete.”

RACGP President, Professor Karen Price said given the growing number of COVID-19 cases and the unknown impacts of long COVID going forward, enabling access to longer telephone consultations was vital.

“GPs have told the RACGP the removal of Medicare patient rebates for longer phone consultations has reduced access to care and increased health gaps for vulnerable patients,” Professor Price said.

“This includes rural communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older people, people with disability and mental health concerns, many of whom already have poorer health outcomes than the general population,” Dr Price said.

“Longer phone consultations are critical for GPs to provide care for patients with COVID-19 who may need antivirals. Given the growing number of COVID-19 cases, enabling access to longer telephone consultations is vital.

“The RACGP firmly believes all Australians deserve access to high quality care. And for this to happen telehealth should be available for all GP consultation types and lengths, with video and telephone items valued equally – nobody should be disadvantaged due to their circumstances.”

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