

MEDIA RELEASE

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Telehealth recommendations will impact access to healthcare

A draft recommendation to remove Medicare funding for initial telehealth consultations with non-GP specialists represents outdated thinking and will seriously limit patient access to essential healthcare, particularly for vulnerable patients and those living outside of large population centres.

The Medicare Benefits Schedule Review Advisory Committee's (MRAC) is consulting on recommendations as part of a review of Medicare funded telehealth services and is expected to provide its final recommendations to the federal government later this year.

Australian Medical Association President Professor Steve Robson said while the AMA supports many of the draft recommendations proposed by the review, others would seriously impact patient access to non-GP specialist services, including mental health care.

"There are serious concerns amongst the profession about the proposed removal of funding for an initial consultation with a specialist," Professor Robson said.

"Removing this funding will make it more difficult for patients to access healthcare in a timely fashion, while some patients will have to travel hundreds of kilometres to see a specialist," Professor Robson said.

"These services already require a referral from a GP with accompanying information about a patient's condition and any decision on whether a specialist consultation should be face-to-face or via telehealth should be a clinical one."

Professor Robson said MRAC appeared dismissive of research showing the positive benefits of telehealth and taking the same approach that is applied to GP telehealth consultations was inappropriate in the context of a referred service.

"It looks like little more than a cost-cutting exercise that will limit access for patients."

"The benefits of telehealth can't be ignored by MRAC with the AMA's Health is the Best Investment report finding the estimated benefit of telehealth from reduced travel in 2021-22 was \$1.35 billion, and that further integration of telehealth across the whole health system could save up to around \$14 billion each year."

Professor Robson said there were some positive recommendations in the report that will strengthen telehealth delivery for Australians and remove loopholes that have allowed businesses to provide Medicare funded telehealth for patients they have never met before or do not have a valid referral.

"These services exploit current MBS rules to provide little more than prescriptions with no continuity of care. The introduction of telehealth has been a very positive development in the Australian health care system and after several years of experience it works best for patients when it is part of continuous and collaborative models of care. Telehealth should also remain available for emergency situations and to support patients who would otherwise be unable to access appropriate care."

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[Read the AMA's submission to the MRAC consultation](#)

Read more about the review on the [Department of Health and Aged Care website](#)
