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**COVID-19 – AMA AND GOVERNMENT DEVELOP IMPROVED
 TELEHEALTH ARRANGEMENTS FOR PATIENTS**

A breakthrough agreement brokered by the AMA with the Federal Government for expanded telehealth access to general practitioners and other medical specialists will allow continuation of normal patient care, and reduce the need for scarce Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

The \$699 million breakthrough agreement was announced this morning by Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Health Minister Greg Hunt.

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, said the new telehealth arrangements will allow even more patients from this week to have consultations with general practitioners and some other medical specialists without leaving home.

Dr Bartone said that the AMA has been working with the Federal Government for weeks to ensure that telehealth is widely available so that patients can access care without the risk of exposure to or spread of the coronavirus.

“This is vital in ensuring that usual patient care can continue comprehensively despite the increasing threat of COVID-19,” Dr Bartone said.

“The new telehealth arrangements to be implemented in the coming days will support patient consultations, which do not require a physical examination, to be conducted with general practitioners and some other medical specialists by telehealth.

“Patients who still need to visit their doctor can continue to do so.

“This also means that patients can maintain their home isolation.

“Doctors will be able to conduct telehealth consultations from their practices or while they themselves may be in home isolation. And it will reduce public hospital presentations that could have occurred without telehealth access.

“Critically, it will reduce avoidable use of PPE. Doctors at present require PPE for any patient with symptoms suggesting potential COVID-19. Telehealth consultations require no PPE. It will cut down use of PPE, freeing the scarce supply for use elsewhere in the health system.”

Dr Bartone said that, as part of the negotiations with Health Minister Hunt, the AMA raised concerns about the ongoing sustainability of medical practices should they face business disruption or closure following exposure to COVID-19.

“The AMA agreement with Minister Hunt confirms that the Federal Government will extend three measures to provide ongoing support for general practice and other specialist practices,” Dr Bartone said.

“The first measure is a doubling of the bulk billing incentive for general practitioners to treat patients by telehealth without patient payment.

“Second, changes to bulk billing requirements will allow doctors to follow their usual business practice for telehealth consultations, while concessional patients who visit their GP will continue to receive services at no cost.

“The third measure is an enhanced Practice Incentive Payment (PIP) for general practices during the COVID-19 period, recognising that some consultations require face to face consultations and physical examinations.

“This third measure acknowledges that general practices, like many other businesses across the economy, face viability pressures arising from COVID-19. These practices employ tens of thousands of nurses, receptionists, and related ancillary staff.

“This third measure also recognises that we need medical practices to stay open. It’s essential for many doctors to still be at work to see patients. These frontline doctors need support, as do their family members who worry when they leave for work each morning.”

Dr Bartone said the Government has rightly recognised the growing need of addressing mental health in the community.

“Due to scale and uncertainty of COVID-19, we’ll need to constantly monitor the mental health of the nation and provide further support as it becomes needed,” Dr Bartone said.

“The Prime Minister and Minister Hunt have today made it easier for patients to see their doctors, and for doctors to keep operating their practices as all Australians work to contain the spread of Covid-19 and stay safe and healthy.

“It may take some patients and doctors who are not familiar with telehealth some time to adjust, but the adjustment will be worthwhile,” Dr Bartone said.

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