

TRANSCRIPT

Tuesday, 2 July 2024

Transcript: AMA President, Professor Stephen Robson, ABC Canberra, Breakfast,

Subject: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's *Australia's health 2024: in brief*

HOST: Georgia Stynes

QUESTION: Well, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare latest report identifies Australia as having one of the best life expectancies in the world. So that's pretty good, right? However, this means that people are spending an increasing number of years not in the best health, although we might be living longer. And this is part of good medical care, right? And that can place more pressure and demand on the health system. So, living longer, are we necessarily living better? It's a tricky one. Joining us is AMA President Professor Steve Robson who is our guest. Good morning.

STEVE ROBSON: Good morning, Georgia.

QUESTION: These figures, I wish I had time to go through the whole thing because it's quite fascinating. Can we just firstly go to how long we're living? I'm interested in this.

STEVE ROBSON: I think the first point from the report is that Australians are living longer than ever before. And of course, women on average live longer than men. But in contrast to some other areas in the world, where in fact life expectancy has begun to drop again for the first time in history, Australians are actually living long lives. But you're absolutely correct, Georgia, there's a big difference between living a long life and living a healthy life.

QUESTION: OK, so what's getting in the way of that healthy life then?

STEVE ROBSON: I think we recognise if we look around us that Australians are getting older, we have a low birth rate and that means that people like me, oldies like me, are making up an increasing proportion of the population. And of course, older people naturally have greater levels of health need, they make more demands on the health system, as you pointed out before, Georgia. So, we need to factor that into the way that we plan, the way that we build our society and all of the supports within it.

QUESTION: OK. So, what I'm hearing though, we're living longer too, quality of life. So, this is strain on health system.

STEVE ROBSON: I think it's really important to look at, you know, resources devoted to health care are an investment rather than a cost. And it's really easy to get into that paradigm of this is costing us a lot of money. There's no doubt it is. But we've seen today with the bulk billing figures that if you in fact invest in health, that you get better outcomes. And I think there's no problem with Australians living longer lives if they're healthier; if they do have health problems, that they're well controlled so they can live a productive, happy life and things like that.

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QUESTION: Now, I know this is probably a topic close to your heart, but one of these things is getting regular care, isn't it? And preventative and having your check up so you get things early. So where are we sitting when it comes to that side of it and GPs in particular?

STEVE ROBSON: I think it's a really good point that having things like health checks and so on regularly with your GP is really important, but I think we need to look even more broadly, Georgia, and say, how easy is it to be healthy if you have income problems, if you have housing problems, if you can't eat healthily? We know that the diabetes report is being released to the Parliament this week, and it's likely to tell a story that Australians are not eating healthily, that they are having issues with things like sugary drinks and so on.

So, I think broadly, yes, we need to make sure that we have great access to GPs, that we have good checks. But also, as a society, we need to make sure that everybody can afford to eat healthily, that healthy food and healthy drink are available, that there's opportunities for exercise, and they're all the things that make us a healthy society, and that's great for all of us.

GEORGIA STYNES: Can we talk about though just the doctor visits?

STEVE ROBSON: Sure.

QUESTION: Because we've doubled those.

STEVE ROBSON: Yes

QUESTION: But I find that interesting because I wonder if that's a certain section of the society has doubled as opposed to others cutting what you talked about before, which is cost and other things, and other people are not going as much.

STEVE ROBSON: It's a really good point. These figures only ever give you an average snapshot, and you're absolutely correct. There are some Australians with health problems who will have to go and see a doctor or seek health care much more often than other people.

And I think the other thing in these figures is that I suspect, in 1984 when the first figures were taken, we actually had longer consultations with our GPs, and these days, they're shorter. So, it means you're going to need more to get through the same number of health problems. And you're absolutely correct. I suspect there are some Australians who see their GP a couple of times a year; others who need to see them perhaps every week. And we're looking at an overall picture. But it does say that we need to make sure that access to GPs is accessible and affordable for every Australian who needs it, particularly the most vulnerable.

GEORGIA STYNES: Professor Steve Robson is the president of the AMA. Steve, when we've spoken before and these figures before, there has been a thing around the difference between, say, city and regional. Like, that's been a big thing. Do we get much from this report in terms of if we've improved there with access?

STEVE ROBSON: It's a really good point, and the report's very comprehensive. And we do see this picture that if you live out of a major centre, if you live in a regional and particularly a remote area, it is much more difficult to get the medical care that you need. And this is a huge factor for people even making decisions to continue living in those areas. We have primary care. We have general practitioners and people who work with them who provide care. And especially, we need to look at other specialist resources, and I think many people will be anxious about care, for example, to specialist psychiatrists. So it's really almost completely limited to large urban areas. And we know that Australia is in the grip of a mental health crisis, and making sure that we can attract psychiatrists and have access to things like that in regional areas is so important.

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GEORGIA STYNES: I noticed that chronic disease is on the rise. Does mental health sit separately to that? And if we're talking about chronic disease, what are we talking about?

STEVE ROBSON: I think it's really important to understand that these things are completely interlinked, and conditions like chronic arthritis, like diabetes, like hypertension, like dementia, are so intimately wrapped up in the mental health of the community. And in fact, dealing and being a carer can affect the mental health of carers as well. So, it's probably no surprise that we have a community where mental health is so important, where people in emotional distress, people under pressure, and that is not only a burden of compassion but it's also a burden economically as well. So, we need to make sure that we deal with these things because they're just so important for the overall economics of the country. They're not just a compassionate issue, Georgia.

GEORGIA STYNES: One of the things, too, is an increase in waiting times for surgeries. Do we get a sense of what surgeries we're talking about?

STEVE ROBSON: Yes. If you look around the country, in our public hospitals, we're now at record levels of delay in people having access to care, and we're talking about things like joint replacement surgery, about having your gallbladder out, having all of those routine things that are so fundamental to making people's lives better. And it's important to understand that if you're on a waiting list you need eye surgery, you can't see. You need ear surgery, you can't hear. You need joint surgery, you can't move. All of these things affect your life so profoundly that we need to absolutely focus on trying to deal with this to get through the backlog of surgery so we can get Australians moving, get them seeing, get them hearing, and get their lives back together again. So it's not just a statistical exercise. It's about people's lives and allowing them to function as people in the community.

GEORGIA STYNES: What's the biggest wake-up call, do you think, or should be a wake-up call looking at this? Like, what are other things that you're taking from it?

STEVE ROBSON: To be honest, Georgia, I think the biggest wake-up call of all is the data around mental health, and we know mental health affects people so profoundly. It affects the people around them. It means that it's difficult for you to work, to enjoy life, to go on holidays, to care for others, to run your relationships, and it also makes people turn to substances, to alcohol, to other things, to help bear that burden. So I think the most fundamental thing of all that we need to really see as a red flag is that epidemic in mental health conditions. And I think if we make that a point of focus, it will help a lot of other things shake out, Georgia.

GEORGIA STYNES: It's been really interesting chatting to you today. Thanks so much.

STEVE ROBSON: It's a real pleasure. Thank you.

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