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**SAFE AND STEADY HEALTH BUDGET, BUT BIGGER REFORMS ARE STILL TO COME**

The Government has tonight delivered a safe and steady Health Budget, which outlines a broad range of initiatives across the health portfolio – but some of the bigger reforms and the biggest challenges are yet to come.

AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, said the Government has provided some necessary funding to aged care, mental health, rural health, the PBS, and medical research, with many decisions directly responding to AMA policy.

Dr Gannon said that, due to a number of ongoing major reviews, this Budget is notable as much for what is not in it as for what is in it.

“There are many significant and worthy announcements tonight, but the bigger structural health reform announcements are yet to come,” Dr Gannon said.

“The major reviews of the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and private health are not yet finalised, and the ensuing policies will be significant.

“We are pleased that indexation has been restored to general practice and other specialty consultations, but new and considerable investment in general practice is missing.

“Also, the signature primary care reform – Health Care Homes – did not rate a mention.

“The Stronger Rural Health Strategy is a very positive package, and will go some way to improving access to doctors for rural and regional Australians. (See separate media release.)

“Public hospital funding is consistent with the COAG National Health Agreement. However, as pointed out in the AMA Public Hospital Report Card, more funding will be needed over the long term.

“This will involve the States and Territories doing their bit to work with the Commonwealth to increase the funding to appropriate levels.

“The Government is to be congratulated on its ongoing commitment to medical research, and for its positive contribution to improving Indigenous health, especially eye health, ear health, and remote dialysis.

“The investments in aged care and mental health must be seen as down-payments with more attention needed in coming years and decades as community demand drastically increases.

“We need to see a more concerted approach from the Government in prevention. We need to keep people fitter and healthier and away from expensive hospital care.”

Dr Gannon said that the AMA also supports the establishment of the Workforce Incentive Program, which will incorporate and expand on the existing Practice Nurse Incentive Program and the GP Rural Incentive Program.

“This new funding program will increase the support available for general practices to employ other health professionals, including non-dispensing pharmacists, as part of a GP-led team-based approach to care.”

Dr Gannon said the Government has correctly identified many of the areas of greatest need in this Health Budget, but the reality is that even greater funding will be needed to ensure long-term sustainability of the pillars of the health system.

“Good health policy is an investment, not a cost,” Dr Gannon said.

“We look forward to the finalisation of the private health and MBS reviews, and the reforms that will flow from those processes.

“We expect to see any savings from the MBS Review reinvested into the MBS in the form of new and improved items in a transparent way.

“We anticipate more significant health policy funding announcements ahead of the next election,” Dr Gannon said.

The AMA will comment further following closer examination of the many announcements in tonight’s Budget.

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