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PATIENTS EMBRACE TELEHEALTH – COVID-19 REFORMS MUST BE MADE PERMANENT

Australian patients are overwhelmingly embracing telehealth as an important part of their health care management, making a very strong case for the Government to make the COVID-19 telehealth reforms a permanent feature of our health system.

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, said today that the AMA has been a strong telehealth advocate for many years and is delighted that patients are now reaping the benefits.

Dr Bartone said that around 10 million Medicare-funded telehealth services have been provided, either over the phone or via video, a significant majority of which have been provided by GPs and other specialists since the Medicare telehealth items were introduced in March.

“Telehealth is the norm in many parts of the world, providing patients with a convenient option to access care where they don’t need a physical examination,” Dr Bartone said.

“Telehealth is not and never likely to be a complete substitute for face to face visits to the doctor, but does provide a convenient and highly appropriate option that can supplement visits to the practice in person.

“The initial decision to open up Medicare funding for telehealth services was driven by the need to reduce the risks of the transmission of COVID-19 and to protect vulnerable patients.

“However, it has also given us the opportunity to trial telehealth in the Australian context – with current arrangements due to expire in September.

“While there have been some important learnings along the way, the overall sense from GPs, other specialists, and patients is that it has been a tremendous success.

“We must now turn to the task of seamlessly and fully integrating telehealth into day to day general practice and other relevant medical specialties, and ensuring continuity of care for patients - and that we follow best practice standards.

“Our very successful primary care system is built around the relationship between a usual GP and a patient.

“For GP telehealth consultations, we need to continue to follow this proven approach and ensure that future telehealth arrangements are built around this concept. We should also consider how to permanently implement telehealth across other relevant medical specialities.

“One suggested approach is to allow GPs or general practices to allow patients to voluntarily nominate a GP and/or a practice in order to be able to access telehealth services from their GP once the current interim telehealth arrangements are due to end.

“We need to avoid ‘pop up’ or purely ‘virtual’ opportunistic other models of telehealth that fragment care and, in some cases, blur the important distinction between the prescribing and dispensing of medicines.

“Most telehealth consultations to date have been by telephone rather than video, which reflects the speed at which telehealth has been rolled out and the limited preparedness of medical practices and patients to utilise video consultations.

“Both options can provide a quality service for patients, but the longer term may see a greater emphasis on video.

“Reliable, robust, and very fast internet across the country must be a priority to make telehealth work.

“And we must note that, for some patients, the phone is their only option, and they must not be discriminated against.

“The Government needs to support the profession through this transition with funding to augment and integrate practice infrastructure and the development of appropriate frameworks and guidelines and provide the stimulus for wider sector innovation.

“Health Minister Greg Hunt has already acknowledged the success of telehealth, and is actively considering how it can continue beyond the current interim arrangements.

“The AMA is working to provide the Government with advice on how to move forward.

“Importantly, during the current COVID19 crisis, telehealth means that patients have no reason not to access care from their doctor.

“Looking after your health is critical and, as restrictions are eased, the local doctor’s practice is one of the safest places people can visit.

“If people are still worried, they can always ask to see if a telehealth consultation is available and suitable for the particular health complaint.

“Telehealth is the way of the future, and must become another essential element of Australia’s world class health system.”

18 May 2020

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