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REVIEW OF URGENT AFTER HOURS GP SERVICES IS BIGGER THAN CHEAP ATTACKS ON SO-CALLED ‘DODGY DOCTORS’

The AMA today criticised media reports that trivialise and misrepresent the findings of the final report of the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) *Review of Urgent After-Hours Primary Care Services funded through the MBS*.

AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, said it was wrong to smear all after-hours services because of inappropriate practices, including alleged use of ‘unqualified’ doctors, in a small number of cases.

“Access to after-hours GP services is a critical part of our health system,” Dr Gannon said.

“Many families depend on these services, but they should not be seen as a substitute for a visit to a patient’s usual GP.

“If a patient can wait until the next day to see their usual GP, or attend their usual general practice, that is the best option.

“A patient’s usual GP will be able to provide more comprehensive care – with immediate access to a patient’s history and a better understanding of a patient’s health care needs for things like allergies or medications, for example.”

Dr Gannon said the Taskforce’s report has properly identified a range of concerns about current after-hours services, and has added to the case for reform in this area.

“The AMA wants to see a model of after-hours care that ensures medical deputising services (MDSs) – the companies that provide the after-hours services in many cases – employ doctors with the right skills, training and supervision, and are properly accredited,” Dr Gannon said.

“We want to see triage processes that encourage people to see their usual GP if their condition is not urgent and can wait for a consultation over the next few days.

“The system also needs strong links back to a patient’s usual GP or regular general practice to encourage continuity of care.

“The report picks up many of the issues and concerns that the AMA and other stakeholders raised during the consultation process, but others fell outside the Taskforce’s terms of reference and will need further consideration and action.

“It is clear that focusing solely on Medicare rebates is not the answer.”

Dr Gannon said the AMA is committed to working with the Government to build on the work of the Taskforce, and come up with a package of reforms that support sustainable high quality MDS services in the provision of quality and accessible after-hours care for patients who need and expect them.

“The AMA has highlighted the option for a new model of funding for MDSs,” Dr Gannon said.

“If the Government accepts the Taskforce's recommendations on MBS changes, then it should use some of the savings generated to develop a specific funding program for MDSs, which requires them to meet agreed quality standards and ensure that they can recruit doctors with the right skills and qualifications.

“It also important that any savings in any reform package are re-invested back into general practice.”

Dr Gannon said the report should not be used to attack the doctors who work for the MDSs, whatever their qualifications.

“These are hard-working doctors who are delivering care to their communities – care that would otherwise not be available at crucial times of the day, especially for young families.

“We need to focus on tackling poor models of care, rather than demonising doctors or undermining confidence in the after-hours primary care services that play an important role in the health system and in the community.”

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