

Improved access to after-hours GP services

Key Issues

The organisation and provision of after-hours primary health care services is an important element of the overall health care system. Access to primary health care, including after-hours, is considered an important element of high-quality health care.

Primary health care is often the first port of call in meeting after-hours health care needs across the country and in so doing reducing health inequity, lowering rates of avoidable hospitalisation and improving health outcomes.

The after-hours period has traditionally been defined as: being before 8.00 am and after 6.00 pm on weekdays, before 8.00 am and after 12.00 pm on Saturday and all day on Sunday and public holidays.

While this is the case for non-urgent after-hours attendances at a place other than consulting rooms, for non-urgent after-hours attendances in consulting rooms (Items 5000, 5020, 5040, 5060, 5200, 5203, 5207 and 5208) the after-hours period is: before 8am and after 8pm on a weekday, before 8am and after 1pm on a Saturday, and all day on Sunday and public holidays.

Patient consideration

When people become ill outside normal business hours, they often need to access after-hours health care services or advice. The choice of which service to access is influenced by a range of factors such as where they live, the time of day, the accessibility of health care services and mode of delivery.

Bringing forward the Medicare definition of after-hours in-rooms consultation items so that they commence at 6:00pm on weeknights and 12 noon on a Saturday will encourage more practices to provide extended hours of services and will improve patients' access to after-hours GP services, allowing patients to see their usual GP, or attend their usual general practice.

Government consideration

Primary health care is often the first port of call in meeting after hours health care needs across the country and in so doing reducing health inequity, lowering rates of avoidable hospitalisation and improving health outcomes.

Currently, the Medicare definition of non-urgent after-hours in-rooms consultation items does not align with the Medicare definition of non-urgent after-hours at a place other than consulting rooms. This has prevented many patients from seeing their usual GPs or their usual general practice during after-hours.

In recent times, the Government has made a number of changes to MBS funded urgent after-hours GP services to ensure quality after-hours care is available to all Australians.

In line with the goal of providing quality care, the AMA is also of the view that the Medicare definition of an after-hours in-rooms consultation items should be brought forward so that they commence at 6:00pm on weeknights and 12 noon on a Saturday.

AMA position

The AMA calls on the major parties to improve access to after-hours GP services for patients by bringing forward the Medicare definition of after-hours in-rooms consultation items so that they commence at 6:00pm on weeknights and 12 noon on a Saturday.

For further information on this issue please contact Nick Elmitt on 02 6270 5400 or nelmitt@ama.com.au