Tackling Chronic Disease

Key Issues
The increasing incidence of chronic and complex diseases means more people in Australia are living with debilitating illness, unable to work or participate in their communities, and facing poor mental health, disability and premature death.

Addressing and managing the health needs and escalating costs associated with the growing incidence of chronic and complex diseases requires greater emphasis on supporting the role of primary health care, particularly general practice.

With more than half of all potentially preventable hospital admissions due to chronic conditions, there are significant benefits from ensuring access to timely and clinically necessary health care.

Patient consideration
The BEACH reports, *A decade of Australian general practice activity 2004-05 – 2013-14* and *Australian General Practice Activity 2013-14*, showed that not only are GPs seeing people more often, they are spending more time with them because their patients are ageing and presenting with a wider array of chronic and complex health problems.

The chronic problems most often treated by GPs are hypertension, diabetes, depressive disorder, cholesterol-related disorders, chronic arthritis, oesophageal disease, and asthma.

GPs are doing a good job supporting patients with chronic and complex disease. However, current funding arrangements adopt a one size fits all approach and patients with greater clinical need struggle to get access to the extra support they require.

The AMA has promoted a better model of care where extra funding is provided for patients with higher levels of clinical need, enabling GPs and practices to provide more pro-active care for these patients, helping to improve their quality of life and keeping them out of hospital.

Government consideration
A stronger general practice is the key to better health outcomes for patients with chronic and complex disease. In this regard, the Commonwealth has announced a ‘Health Care Home’ trial for patients with chronic and complex disease. This aims to strengthen the linkage between patients, their usual general practice and a nominated GP. Although there is little detail of the plan, it promises more support for patients with higher levels of clinical need.

The AMA supports the vision for a Health Care Home, but there is no indication that the trial will be appropriately resourced or funded. Existing Medicare Chronic Disease funding will simply be redirected and GPs will be asked to deliver enhanced care for patients with no additional financial support.

This contrasts with successful initiatives like the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) Coordinated Care (CVC) program that provides significant additional funding support to GPs to provide comprehensive planned and coordinated care to veterans who are at risk of unplanned hospitalisation – with the support of a practice nurse or community nurse.

AMA position
The AMA calls on the major parties to commit to:

- Appropriate funding for the planned Health Care Homes trial; and

- Use the DVA CVC program as the basis to calculate how much extra money is required. This is essential if we are to improve care for patients and ease pressure on the hospital system.

For further information on this issue please contact Michelle Grybaitis on 02 6270 5400 or mailto:mgrybaitis@ama.com.au