

## **Don't be swayed by protectionist doctors, urge health workers**

Australia's allied health workers are urging the prime minister and premiers not to be swayed by the scare-mongering tactics of the protectionist medical lobby, ahead of this week's Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting.

On the COAG agenda is the Productivity Commission's report on Australia's health workforce. Among the report's recommendations sparking consternation from the Australian Medical Association are proposals to create an independent expert body to consider new MBS items for services provided by health professionals including podiatrists, psychologists and physiotherapists.

"Suggestions that Medicare is heading for a financial blow-out if allied health professionals are given access to Medicare rebates are plainly alarmist," said Dr Lyn Littlefield, executive officer, Health Professions Council of Australia (HPCA).

"What the report and its recommendations make clear is that there are good reasons to substitute another health professional for a doctor where there is clinical evidence that these treatments are at least as successful and more cost-effective than those being delivered by doctors," said Dr Littlefield.

A system ensuring that rebates are available for successful and cost-effective treatments, regardless of whether they are delivered by doctors, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, social workers or other allied health professionals, is a long-term approach welcomed by the HPCA.

"Better utilising the trained health workforce that already exists will in fact improve the economic efficiency of the health sector, and allow ordinary Australians to readily access the health services that best meet their needs," said Dr Littlefield.

Private health insurance arrangements already recognise that allied health professionals have the required skills and competencies to act as first contact practitioners in the community.

"Contrary to AMA claims, the quality of health care is not at risk with the Productivity Commission's innovative proposals," said Dr Littlefield. "Instead, Australia's health system is placed well on a path to recovery."

The national allied health workforce is substantial, with 90,000 spread throughout rural and metropolitan Australia. Using the skills of these health professionals to full advantage could help relieve the medical workforce shortage and ease the bottlenecks in public hospitals and GP clinics.

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