

Strengthening Medicare Taskforce report

The Australian Physiotherapy Association's response

The Federal Government has been handed the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce report. The Taskforce was established to provide a vision for the primary care system and recommend top-priority improvements to address the problems within it. The report makes recommendations that will, they say, make “significant changes to how primary care is funded and delivered to enable high quality, integrated and person-centred care for all Australians.”

The APA acknowledges that the current Medicare system is on the precipice, and that the informal title of ‘world’s best health system’ feels less genuine by the day.

Background

Australia’s primary care system is plagued by workforce shortages and burnout, lack of coordination, poor access, and affordability amongst other structural and funding problems. There is widespread consensus across the health sector that radical and immediate change is required to fix Medicare.

The APA has said previously that Medicare has reached its ‘use-by’ date. The system was designed when GP practices operated much differently, and the role of physiotherapy and other allied health services was not as developed and evidence-based. The need and expectation of Australians has changed faster than the Medicare system can adapt, and we are now seeing a crisis arising from a mix of underfunding, complacency, population increases, and workforce shortages.

What is addressed in the report

The report covers many of the essential reform issues. Most relevant to physiotherapists is the recommendation that “coordinated multidisciplinary teams of health care professionals work to their full scope of practice to provide quality person-centred continuity of care, including prevention and early intervention; and primary care is incentivised to improve population health, work with other parts of the health and care systems, under appropriate clinical governance, to reduce fragmentation and duplication and deliver better health outcomes.”

This is a laudable recommendation, as are others in the report. However, the APA take exception that it predictably holds fast to the dogma that a GP-centric model is the only one worth considering. If reform is on the agenda, then the report should be more open-minded in considering innovative models and overseas examples of enhanced primary care solutions.

What the report gets right, is it advocates for better use of Australia’s allied health workforce and better team coordination. It acknowledges issues of healthcare affordability and access, particularly in rural and remote settings and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The report notes the blended funding model as a more appropriate way of funding care for complex and chronic conditions. These are sensible reflections and sound directions for this Government to act on in the May 2023 Federal Budget.

What is missing

The APA is not alone in seeing the report as missing an opportunity to stipulate outcomes, direct accountability between state and Commonwealth, and provide any indication of how they would evaluate the

'success' of strengthening Medicare. This report is timely, although short at just 12 pages, and lacks specificity and tangibility.

The APA would have preferred to see 'how to' details and measures. The same criticism can be applied to the 10 Year Primary Care Plan delivered by the previous Health Minister, Greg Hunt.

What the APA is advocating for

What we need with some urgency now is a concrete plan with specific, measurable actions. Statements like "we need to enable all health professionals to work to their full scope of practice" need to be replaced with "patients should be entitled to the same Medicare rebate for physiotherapy-referred imaging as GP-referred imaging". Instead of "strengthen funding for more affordable care", we need to see "introduce Medicare-funded access to first contact physiotherapy for musculoskeletal conditions beyond enhanced primary care".

As the Taskforce was chaired by the Minister for Health Mark Butler himself, the APA now has an expectation that this is the basis for funded reforms in the May Federal Budget.

The APA has presented the Government with our [solutions and policies that will strengthen Medicare](#) and Minister Butler, who launched our [Future of Physiotherapy in Australia: A 10-Year Vision Policy](#) white paper, has been briefed on how physiotherapists can be better utilised in the health system. The APA will continue to engage with all governments in pursuing the measures we have publicly outlined. The Department of Health and the Minister now need to present their detailed, measurable and funded policy that strengthens Medicare and utilises physiotherapists appropriately to deliver the reforms urgently needed.