

AUSTRALIAN CHRONIC DISEASE PREVENTION ALLIANCE



Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
covid.sen@aph.gov.au

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Dear Sir/Madam

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Government's response to COVID-19.

The Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance supports the swift actions taken by the Australian Government in responding to COVID-19 and highlights important areas relevant to the chronic disease community as part of the COVID-19 response:

1. Prevention and early detection
2. Telehealth consultations
3. Consistent communication.

The Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance (ACDPA) is an alliance of Cancer Council Australia, Diabetes Australia, National Heart Foundation of Australia, Kidney Health Australia and Stroke Foundation. Members work together to promote prevention, integrated risk assessment, early detection and effective management of chronic disease risk.

Chronic diseases are the leading cause of premature death in Australia. One in two Australians have a chronic disease, and one in four Australians have multiple conditions.

It is essential that people affected by chronic disease are considered in the government's response to COVID-19 both immediately and in the future. Many people with existing conditions are at increased risk of infection or complications from COVID-19 and, at the same time, require access to ongoing care to manage their conditions. It is also crucial to support risk assessment to enable early detection of diseases like type 2 diabetes, kidney disease, cancers, heart disease and stroke to prevent a wave of late-stage diagnoses in the future.

Prevention and early detection

We strongly support the emphasis on prevention and early detection by the Australian, State and Territory Governments in response to COVID-19. We support the weight given to public health evidence in informing the government response, including a combination of pre-emptive measures to prevent the spread of disease and enhance early detection through the broad availability of testing.

Prevention currently receives less than 1.5 percent of the national health budget, with the vast majority of national health spending dedicated to treatment and management. While a National Prevention Strategy is in development, the value of prevention has been demonstrated in the response to COVID-19, along with the importance of investing in preventive measures and early detection.

We recommend scaling up Australia's spending on prevention to five percent of the national health budget to reduce the impact of future health challenges from infectious diseases and chronic conditions, which contribute to the vast majority of premature deaths in Australia.

Telehealth consultations

ACDPA strongly supports the development of telehealth MBS items in response to COVID-19 and we acknowledge the speed with which these items were developed to protect the health of Australians. We also recognise that health groups were invited to engage as the items were developed and expanded to ensure the needs of people living with chronic disease were met – especially as many people faced access challenges due to their increased risk of infection and outpatient clinic closures.

The ability to access online consultations is important for continued management of chronic conditions during COVID-19 and to support risk assessment and early detection to prevent late diagnoses and long-term health implications.

We recommend that these measures become a permanent change beyond the current COVID-19 pandemic to enhance access to care and rehabilitation services for the many people across Australia who are affected by chronic disease. Telehealth has the potential to reduce existing inequities in accessing care and rehabilitation services, including for people from regional, rural and remote areas.

Consistent communication

We recognise the enormous impacts of COVID-19 on the entire population and we highlight the importance of careful communication to reduce the impact of the virus. We strongly support the role of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee in informing the National Cabinet, as well as the visibility of the Chief Medical Officer in joint announcements with the Prime Minister. We recognise the emphasis on prevention and the development of consistent messaging around handwashing and physical distancing. We also support the statements encouraging people to keep their medical appointments to manage their health during COVID-19.

We note that there are some challenges in providing consistent communication and advice across States, Territories and nationally, especially when restrictions and jurisdictional responses varied. We support the opportunity to learn from this experience to enhance consistent communication across the country and jurisdictions for future health challenges.

Thank you for considering this response.

Yours sincerely

Sharon McGowan

Chair Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance
CEO Stroke Foundation