

KEY MESSAGES

Primary Health Care in Australia: towards a more sustainable and equitable health care system

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Policy context

Governments around the world are looking to primary care to deliver a more sustainable and equitable health care system. Placing primary care at the centre of the health care system is widely seen as way to prevent and manage chronic diseases, and avert further declines in health status, unnecessary hospitalisations and escalating health care costs.

To achieve a more sustainable and equitable a health system requires a highly responsive and efficient primary care sector that is aligned to the needs of the population. In turn, this requires an understanding of how the primary care system functions, where it performs well and how it could be improved to deliver better health system performance. A key part of this is the interrelationship between primary health care and other health care services, as well as the degree to which health care use is determined by non-health factors such as geographic and socioeconomic status.

Key messages

- > In areas with lower GP access, indicators of need such age and socioeconomic status are important determinants of GP use. Conversely, factors other than need are important drivers of GP use in areas where access is high.
- > The availability of emergency departments has a positive influence on GP use, indicating that there are important supply side interactions between primary care and acute care.
- > A greater focus on social care could have significant impact on downstream hospital stays.
- > Better prevention and management of chronic diseases have the potential to substantially improve health outcomes and save significant health care resources particularly at the hospital level.
- > Whilst most specialists reduce their fees for low income patients, substantial co-payments and barriers to access remain for many Australians.
- > Higher co-payments lead to significant financial difficulties for elderly Australians with multiple morbidities, indicating that there are insufficient safeguards in the Australian health care system to protect patients from hardship.
- > Affordability is a key factor in the way patients choose their care pathway after the onset of illness. In turn, such decisions are based on highly distortionary co-payments that are not aligned to effective, efficient or equitable care.

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