# SUMMARY OF WEBINAR

**Department of Health**

**Update for Primary and Allied Health practitioners**

**26 March 2020**

Presented by Prof Michael Kidd (Principal Medical Advisor) and Dr Andrew Singer (Medical Advisor) at Department of Health

Prof Kidd:

* thanked primary and allied health practitioners for their continuing efforts in delivering health care during current difficult times; and the peak professional bodies supporting members of the health care workforce.
* Noted that together working to stop spread and save lives.
* Noted over 10,000 people had joined the webinar, and that it and transcript would be available on line afterwards.

## General Advice on COVID-19

* Advice on COVID-19 is changing daily. Latest information posted on Department of Health Website: <https://www.health.gov.au/> or via Australian Government’s National Coronavirus Helpline **1800 020 080**
* From 13 March, Australian Government has been implementing significant changes to delivery of health care by moving many consultation items to telehealth (rolling out in stages).
* Latest News are on Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) Website: <http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/news>
* For vulnerable patients, new bulk-billed items have been introduced for telehealth (video-conference attendance or telephone attendance) for GPs, specialists, consultant physicians, obstetricians, consultant psychiatrists, nurse practitioners, allied mental health workers and midwives. No specific provisions for optometry telehealth at this stage.
* Option of using telehealth items now extended to healthcare professionals if they are deemed to be vulnerable (over age 70, Indigenous aged 50+, with chronic condition, immune compromised, pregnant, parents of children under 1); or in isolation/quarantine after exposure to COVID 19 (awaiting test results or diagnosed).

Details on MBS website: <http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/Factsheet-TempBB>

* Government is committed to ensure provision of telehealth does not lead to closure of services (particularly in rural/remote areas or for higher need patient cohorts).
* Face to face consultations should still occur where clinically necessary to avoid adverse health outcomes for patients.
* Advice is being provided to Minister Hunt about options for potential expansion of telehealth items.

## Screening Processes Before Allowing Patients Into Clinic

* Public messaging is that if they have symptoms that could indicate COVID-19 or if they have been in close contact, please contact health practitioners ahead of appointment to clarify arrangements before attending.
* Many practitioners/clinics also now contact patients prior to appointment to check that they don’t have risk factors
* Department of Health has downloadable signs and other resources practitioners can use to warn people before they enter clinical settings.

## Optometry Services

* Government is currently considering advice regarding optometry, dentistry, audiology and other services where practitioners work in close proximity to patients. Further advice will be posted on Department of Health website when available.
* Optometry practitioners are advised to take precautions and limit risk of virus spreading by providing services to patients requiring urgent and emergency care only.

## Non-Essential Elective Surgery (Category 2 and 3)

* Prime Minster announced yesterday that Category 2 and 3 non-essential elective surgery will be postponed for 6 months.
* The impact on patients, private hospitals and their workforce has been acknowledged.
* Government will be engaging with private hospitals to support them to continue operating, and ensure workforce is supported by redeployment or continuing to work and be paid.

## Indigenous Health

* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are in the highest risk category for COVID-19 related serious illness or death, both in urban and remote areas.
* Government announced funding to support many remote communities to provide them with capacity to self-determine what they need to do to protect vulnerable community members locally, and how they will work with local and visiting services.
* Funding rolled out at the moment through NACCHO and other peak organisations.

## Current Advice on Personal Protective Equipment for COVID-19

* There is a Global shortage of COVID-19 testing kits and personal protective equipment (PPE) available, and priority is given to health practitioners working with most vulnerable and highest-risk patient groups
* 100,000s of new masks have been sent to PHNs across country for distribution to health care providers
* Australian government has fast tracked importation and local production of more masks.
* Current advice is that PPE is not required if you are providing care to low-risk patients (e.g. No fever or respiratory symptoms; no exposure to COVID-19; no international travel in the last 14 days).
* Maintain social distancing (1.5metres) at all times where possible.
* Practitioners are advised to ask and screen patients prior to appointments to identify those potentially with or at risk of COVID-19 (resources are available on Department of Health Website).
* Practitioners need to make individual decisions/assessment of risk
* Free online training (Infection Control for COVID-19) provided by Australian Government for healthcare workers, support staff, cleaners and others working in care settings (around 15 minutes):

<https://covid-19training.gov.au/>

## Telehealth

* Government is aware of concerns raised by many practitioners regarding provision of telehealth services to patients who may not have access to technology (e.g. Computers, smartphones, etc).
* Government is committed to ensuring equitable access to telehealth is available to all, including members of the disability community, the elderly, patients with mental health needs, etc.
* Telehealth MBS items can be utilised for landline phone and/or video consultations.
* This is an emerging space, and practitioners and patients are encouraged to be innovative and flexible to continue delivering services. Telehealth is a useful tool, but cannot replace face-to-face consultations in all instances.

## Allied Health, NDIS and Other Providers

* It is critical that that essential health services continue be provided to patients (including those in quarantine isolation, aged care facilities, etc). This needs to be done in a manner that ensures both patient and practitioner are safe.
* Advice is to exercise scrupulous hand hygiene, maintain safe distance (1.5metres) where possible, and only utilise PPE (for high risk groups).
* If practitioners show any potential COVID-19 symptoms (fever, respiratory problems, etc), do not provide care and seek advice from own healthcare provider and/or Australian Government’s National Coronavirus Helpline **1800 020 080**
* If patients are showing symptoms consistent with possible COVID-19 infection or exposure, do not engage in home visits (unless delivering life-saving interventions), but direct them to contact their healthcare provider.
* There may be further guidance coming forward as AHPPC considers what essential services can be provided into the future.
* At present many allied health services are open as essential services, however many businesses may not have enough patients to keep practices open.

Minister Hunt is very conscious of impacts on practices and practitioners, and this has been raised and discussed by peak bodies. Government will welcome recommendations/advice from providers re what is needed to facilitate access.

## New Initiative: GP Respiratory Clinics

* Australian Government is committed to establishing additional 100+ GP Respiratory Clinic to complement state and territory clinics – in existing GP facilities, demountable and mobile locations.
* Each PHN has identified high priority sites where clinics will be established.
* First of these GP Respiratory clinics opened last weekend, and more will roll out in the near future.

## New Initiative: Training of Nurses to Re-Enter Workforce

* Funding has been provided to Australian College of Nursing to provide free online training course (refresher program), designed to help update nurses on acute care knowledge to be able to support the COVID-19 response.
* 1000 places created initially (now fully subscribed) – looking to create/fund more

## Allied health

* More physiotherapies and psychologists are currently required. Go to your local state and territory Department of Health websites for expressions of interest already.

## Rural and remote

* Government is aware of concerns about spread of COVID-19 into rural and remote areas and challenges to limited workforce.
* Government looking to support rural primary care practitioners and rural hospitals assisting in addressing registration obligations with AHPRA, and other initiatives.

## In closing

Professor Kidd

* Thanked participants
* Noted transcript of webinar will become available within 24 hours.
* Noted that the Government recognises and appreciates the work being done by primary and allied health care providers to care for the Australia people and stop spread of COVID-19.