

SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS REPORT 2021

Briony Sinclair

ICPA (Aust) has continued to work on specific education needs motions passed at the 2020 conference as well as motions from previous years. Broadly, issues include: early identification of learning difficulties, access to services, the cost of accessing services, mental health and disability provisions in boarding facilities.

Medicare Rebates and Telehealth

Motions from the 2020 Federal Conference focused on the continuation of telehealth MBS items initiated during the onset of the pandemic with a request to increase the scope and nature of the services provided to assist geographically isolated children with learning disabilities and disorders which affect their ability to learn, including vital Allied Health and Specialist Services.

Federal Council pursued this request with the Hon Greg Hunt MP, Minister for Health and other relevant Ministers, Senators and MPs and correspondence we received from the Medicare Review Branch in response to our request was particularly heartening. The continued announcements by the Department of Health give us increased optimism that we are being heard in our delegations and submissions.

Since the 13 March 2020, more than 300 temporary COVID-19 Medicare Benefits Schedule items have been introduced to reduce the risk of community transmission of COVID-19. These measures will continue through to the end of 2021 at this stage. Among the temporary MBS Telehealth Services are, for example, eight new allied health items for early intervention services for children with autism, pervasive developmental disorder or disability and 20 new Focused Psychological Strategies items for services provided by a psychologist, GP, non-specialist medical practitioner, occupational therapist or social worker. <http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/Factsheet-TempBB>

The Minister for Health stated his hope and intention for telehealth to be retained as a positive legacy of the COVID-19 response. Accordingly, the Department of Health is engaging with the community at all levels to plan a long-term and sustainable future for telehealth, including remote delivery of allied health services.

Minister Hunt recently said in a media release that "The government continues to work with peak bodies to co-design permanent post-pandemic telehealth as part of broader primary care reforms to modernise Medicare and provide flexibility of access to primary and allied healthcare services."

ICPA (Aust) looks forward to continuing work with relevant Ministers, Senators and MPs, the Department of Health and other organisations, to ensure that rural and remote families are not forgotten during these changing times.

Gifted and Talented

Federal Council continues to pursue adequate support and resources for geographically isolated gifted and talented students and their families. We welcomed the GERRIC centre of UNSW offering an online course for parents of gifted children in September of last year. Unfortunately this course is no longer available, however Federal Council will continue to advocate for future availability of such programs.

Submissions

Specific Education Needs of rural and remote students were highlighted through four separate submissions by Federal Council in the past 12 months:

1. Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005
2. The Inquiry into Remote and Complex Environments Home Learning and Teaching during COVID-19
3. Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance, and
4. NDIS Community Consultation on Supporting young children and their families 2021.

Submissions are available on the ICPA website when they are published <http://www.icpa.com.au/au/resources/submissions> if members should wish to access them.

Mental Health

"Resilience is based on compassion for ourselves as well as compassion for others." (Sharon Salzberg)
The past 12 months have marked devastating losses in our communities. Unfortunately, we cannot always be sure of why these deaths happen. Still, we do need to know that there are services available to those with depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and other mental health concerns as well as support for their loved ones.

Since the advent of COVID-19, ICPA (Aust) has been particularly concerned about the mental health of boarding and tertiary students separated from their families when border closures have prevented travel between states as well as enduring isolating enforced quarantine measures which in some cases have been entirely unsuitable for the age group of the students and therefore putting their physical, mental and emotional safety at risk. Likewise, the stresses on their families have been immeasurable. Support for the ongoing mental health of students and their families has been one of the arguments for No Borders for Boarders campaigns conducted by State and Federal ICPA councils since governments began limiting peoples activities and travel in April 2020.

The mental health of our families and young people is paramount to our rural communities to build strong and resilient futures. ICPA (Aust) continues to advocate for school-based mental health programs for geographically isolated children and resources for families.

If you have any immediate concerns, please contact your local health service to access appropriate care for you or your family.

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

ICPA (Aust) has had the opportunity to meet with Hon Mark Coulton MP, Minister for Regional Health on several occasions both face to face and virtually in the past twelve months as well as the Honourable Linda Reynolds, Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and have used the opportunity to raise the topic of telehealth along with discussions on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). We have also been involved in several NDIS consultations, including attending webinars on changes to the early childhood approach to implementation of the NDIS, which included detail on a proposal to change the age group best suited to receive early childhood services from under seven years of age, to under nine years which should be a positive improvement to the Scheme. Further information on the NDIS and relevant information for our members can be found at <https://www.ndis.gov.au/>.

National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA)

ICPA (Aust) have continued to engage with the NRHA in the last 12 months, and met in Canberra in March 2021 with CEO Gabrielle O’Kane and NRHA Board Chairperson, Nicole O’Reilly, with discussion focusing on telehealth and early identification of learning difficulties and intervention.

The NRHA has kept a close eye on the developments of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on rural communities. NRHA provides factsheets which may be of interest to members e.g. Rural and Remote Mental Health Help Sheet, Rural Health Scholarships, Education and Training.

<https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/factsheets/thumbs>.

National Rural Health Commissioner

The National Rural Health Commissioner, Professor Ruth Stewart, has been busy in her first year in the position and is currently supporting the government’s ongoing rural response to COVID-19 and advising on the impact to the health workforce in regional, rural and remote communities. ICPA (Aust) hope to meet with Professor Stewart soon to outline our shared interests in rural and remote communities for the future of our children.

As many of you will know, the wheels of change don’t always move as quickly as we would like but as Andy Warhol once said "It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you don't stop."

If the last 50 years has shown us anything then it would be that ICPA does not stop no matter how slowly things might go. May the next 50 years be as industrious as the first and may our members continue to be the resilient, caring people they always have been.