

# ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



## 2022 SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS PORTFOLIO CONFERENCE REPORT

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The focus for the Specific Education Needs portfolio this year has continued to be advocating for an expansion of telehealth services along with Medicare and other Private Health Fund rebates, early intervention services, universal access to Federally funded health clinics and mental health program needs for rural and remote students.

### **Allied Health Telehealth – Medicare Rebates**

Thanks to COVID-19, more Australians have come to see the benefits of and place for telehealth which has seen the Government expand Medicare assistance for telehealth services. Following the 2021 Federal Conference, ICPA (Aust) wrote to then Minister for Health Hon Greg Hunt MP and other relevant Ministers, asking for *online* allied health services, such as Speech and Occupational Therapy, to be permanently included as Telehealth Medical Benefits Scheme items to help with the cost of such therapies for rural and remote children.

In response to this correspondence in late April we received a reply from the Department of Health Medicare Reviews Unit Assistant Secretary outlining that *“From 1 January 2022, this includes allied health services by phone and video in relation to chronic disease management, autism, pervasive developmental disorder and disability, allied health follow-up for people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, and mental health... Telehealth consultations by GPs have also been made permanent since 1 January 2022, through which relevant referrals to allied and medical specialists may be provided.”*

Unfortunately, in order to access this Medicare rebate for Speech and/or Occupational Therapies, a child needs to first have a General Practitioner Management Plan (GPMP, previously Chronic Disease Management Plan). Further, Medicare benefits are only available for telehealth with the General Practitioner if the ‘patient’ has seen the GP (or been to the GP’s practice) face-to-face in the previous 12 months. The well-known and ongoing issues associated with accessing a GP makes these restrictions extremely challenging for rural and remote families and result in long delays and increased expense at the detriment of the timely and satisfactory treatment and development of a child.

It was also recommended in the response that ICPA (Aust) raise this with the incoming Government following the election. With a new Federal Government in place ICPA (Aust) is encouraged by the appointment of an Assistant Minister for Rural and Regional Health, Emma McBride MP by the new Government. Federal Council will earnestly raise this with Minister McBride along with new Minister for Health and Aged Care the Hon Mark Butler MP. While to date we are unaware of specific policy from the new Government in this space, we do know that there has been a commitment to strengthening Medicare, with a view to making access to General Practitioners easier. More information can be found here <https://www.alp.org.au/policies/medicare-and-your-health>

### **Telehealth - Private Health Funds**

Following receipt of correspondence requesting that the rebates provided by Private Health Insurers extend to Allied Health Services to assist with the educational development of geographically isolated children, Dr Rachel David, CEO of Private Healthcare Australia responded with the following, *"Private Health[care] Australia was very pleased that the industry was able to quickly move to allowing telehealth rebates for customers from March 2020. Telehealth has generally been a success for many Australians, and as you have recognised, funds have either extended access to telehealth or made it a permanent feature of their products. We are confident that each of our member funds will provide rebates for telehealth permanently. While telehealth is going to be a permanent feature of Australian health care, there are still some issues to be considered to maximise access for Australians accessing telehealth. These issues include quality standards, training for practitioners and ensuring that city- or overseas-based services do not affect the viability of existing providers living and serving in remote communities. Any further feedback or advice from your membership to improve access, quality and service continuity would be most appreciated."*

Dr David kindly forwarded ICPA (Aust)'s letter to each of Private Healthcare Australia's member health funds for their information and consideration.

For the interests of our members, the peak organisation, Speech Therapy Australia, lists Private Health Funds allowing customers who have extras cover for speech pathology (May 2021) to make a claim for speech pathology services delivered via telehealth [here](#).

### **Early Intervention Services in Rural and Remote Areas**

Early intervention needs to have started before these children attend Primary School, to make sure they have the best start to their education however many pre-school aged children in regional and remote Australia continue to have no access to vital early intervention assessments or programs. A Medicare rebate is available for some services, however accessing those services and the accompanying rebate in rural and remote Australia can be difficult due to a lack of services or the distances needed to travel to access a service. While there are some existing early intervention service providers in rural and remote Australia without consistent and guaranteed funding, it is challenging, if not impossible for to expand to service areas without any access to services. There is also little incentive for new services to commence in these areas.

The lack of and need for increased support for early intervention services in rural and remote areas was raised following the 2021 Federal Conference, with then Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Greg Hunt MP, with a request to increase financial support for existing organisations to expand and support new organisations willing to take their Early Intervention Services into regional and remote Australia. Federal Council also requested an increase to the number of sessions covered by Medicare. In the correspondence we referred to data from the Royal Far West POSITION PAPER – JULY 2017 SUPPORTING CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA which clearly illustrates the developmental vulnerability of children in rural and remote areas. The Position Paper can be found [here](#). No response was forthcoming from the former Minister.

ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate for more support for early intervention services with the new Government at every opportunity, to ensure all rural and remote students have improved access to interventions and services necessary to enhance the educational outcomes of geographically isolated children.

### **Universal Access to Federally Funded Health Clinics in Rural/Remote Areas**

During the Conference in 2021, ICPA (Aust) heard of distressing situations whereby remote families were being refused treatment at federally funded 'local' health clinics as they "don't meet the criteria" whereupon they must travel vast distances to access treatment for what could have otherwise been dealt with closer to where they live. In a letter sent to the then Federal Minister for Health and other relevant Ministers and agencies in December, ICPA (Aust) articulated that discrimination based on race, demographic or any other criteria by publicly funded health facilities is unacceptable, ever, let alone in a situation where there are no local

alternatives for rural and remote families to 'conveniently' access. Unfortunately, no response has been received and we are still hearing of circumstances where this is occurring. ICPA (Aust) are committed to ensuring that this issue will be raised in upcoming meetings, consultations, delegations and further correspondence.

### **Mental Health Program Needs for Rural and Remote Students**

ICPA (Aust) has written to the Federal Government, including the Minister for Health and Aged Care and the Minister for Education and Youth, requesting they "urgently implement age appropriate and high-quality mental health programs within both schools and external services for youth in regional and remote Australia."

While a response was received from the former Minister in March, referencing strategies the Government had put into place to improve access to mental health services ICPA (Aust) harbours concerns for the lack of urgency in addressing this matter.

With the new Federal Government now in place, ICPA (Aust) is pleased to note their commitment announced during the election campaign to Restore Regional Mental Telehealth Services by reinstating 'the 50 per cent loading, allowing regional and rural Australians to access bulk billed telehealth psychiatry consultations' <https://www.alp.org.au/policies/regional-mental-telehealth-services> as well as the 'Students Wellbeing Boost' program, with plans to deliver:

- A \$200 million Student Wellbeing Boost to get students' mental health and wellbeing back on track. This will mean more school counsellors and psychologists, and extra funding for camps, excursions, as well as sporting and social activities that improve kids' wellbeing
- A voluntary mental health check tool so primary school students who are struggling can get extra help.

ICPA (Aust) look forward to seeing these commitments come to fruition and are hopeful they will provide much needed assistance, without delay.

To assist members, ICPA (Aust) has collated a selection of resources and contacts on its website for members to access where required. This page can be found [here](#). Federal Council will continue to add relevant services and resources to this page to assist members to support their children. Should members have any suggestions of possible further resources to be included, we would welcome you to contact Federal Council.