

# ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



## 2023 FEDERAL CONFERENCE SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS PORTFOLIO REPORT

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The ICPA (Aust) Specific Education Needs Portfolio are pleased to report that this year there have been several announcements relating to this portfolio from the Federal Government that will benefit our rural and remote children. At last year's Federal Conference, four motions were carried focusing on access to medical and allied health services for our rural and remote children. Two of these motions have been presented at previous conferences and several raised again this year. Federal Council encourages members to continue to provide updated case studies for our advocacy.

After conference Federal Council sent correspondence to the appropriate Ministers and organisations in relation to the following motions. We also continue to bring these issues to attention at delegations as well as in meetings with stakeholders:

- Permanent Medicare Benefits Schedule item number for telehealth consultations be assigned to Allied Health Services to support specific educational needs and learning difficulties of geographically isolated children.
- The request for rebates provided by private health insurers to be extended to allied health services delivered via telehealth.
- The need for Federally funded health clinics to be accessible to all Australians.
- Financial assistance/incentives to attract health graduates to rural and remote areas.

### **Permanent Medicare Benefits Schedule Item Number for Telehealth Consultations Assigned to Allied Health Services**

In correspondence to the Hon Mark Butler MP, Minister for Health and Aged Care, ICPA (Aust) stressed that many geographically isolated children do not have access to face-to-face allied health services. Rural and remote families face issues such as long travel distances, lengthy waitlists to access services in metropolitan areas, little or no access to services locally and financial hardship due to additional costs associated with accessing face-to-face services. Allied health services delivered by telehealth makes these services more accessible for all geographically isolated children.

In a response from the Minister, it was noted that the government recognises that telehealth can significantly improve access to primary and allied health care services for those living in rural and remote locations. From 1 January 2022, many of the telehealth services implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were made permanent on the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS).

From 1 March 2023, several improvements have been made to M10 (face-to-face) and M18 (telehealth equivalent) items of the MBS currently available for children with potential complex Neurodevelopmental Disorders (such as Autism Spectrum Disorder) and other eligible disabilities.

Factsheets that describe the changes to MBS telehealth are available [here](#).



In July 2022, ICPA (Aust) contributed a submission to the Audit of the *Expansion of Telehealth Services*, by the Australian National Audit Office, providing feedback related specifically to the telehealth needs of rural and remote education and geographically isolated students. The submission can be found [here](#).

### **Rebates Provided by Private Health Insurers**

In correspondence sent following conference, ICPA (Aust) reiterated the importance of access to medical specialists and allied health professionals for rural and remote families with Private Healthcare Australia. We requested that private health insurers act quickly to ensure that all rural and remote children have access to affordable and rebated early intervention and medical services necessary to support their educational and developmental needs.

Federal Council were made aware that a number of health insurers have already introduced or are providing benefits for allied health services via telehealth. However, it is up to each individual health insurer to determine which services they cover and whether this cover extends to telehealth. We encourage members to investigate their options.

### **Accessibility to Federally Funded Health Clinics for all Australians**

In ICPA (Aust) correspondence to the Minister Butler, it was emphasised that families are frequently turned away from the local federally funded rural and remote health clinics because they do not meet the criteria to access these services. There are no other local health clinics available for many of these families, therefore they are required to travel vast distances to access treatment for their children, requiring time away from school and impacting their learning and social ability.

In response, the Minister advised that grievances or complaints in relation to accessing health services should be addressed directly to the CEO or Board of the relevant organisation in the first instance. Complaints, concerns or grievances not adequately addressed by the CEO or Board, can be raised with the Office of the Health Ombudsman which is available in each state.

We acknowledge that this motion will once again be presented at the conference this year and would like to assure our members that we continue to advocate for them-and would appreciate any further case studies to strengthen our progress on the issue.

### **Financial Assistance/Incentives to Attract Health Graduates to Rural And Remote Areas**

In further correspondence to the Minister for Health and Aged Care, ICPA (Aust) highlighted that rural and remote areas have been struggling with adequate and appropriate health services long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment and retention of health staff in rural and remote Australia would be improved greatly by offering incentives to live and work in these areas.

In Minister Butler's response, ICPA (Aust) was advised that the government delivers a number of programs and incentives to support the recruitment and retention of General Practitioners in regional, rural and remote locations and that the government is investing \$146 million in new initiatives to provide regional and rural Australia with more doctors, more rural generalists and more team-based care, and to ensure full use of the existing health workforce. Furthermore, we were informed that in recognition of the challenges faced by many GPs, particularly in rural areas, the government has committed \$35 million of this funding to expand the Innovative Models of Care Program from 1 January 2023.

On 9 February 2023 the Federal Government announced the passage of legislation that offers incentives for doctors and nurse practitioners who choose to live and work in rural and remote Australia will have their HELP debt wiped or reduced. The full media release can be read [here](#).



“It means that a doctor or nurse practitioner who lives and works in:

- A remote or very remote town for a time period of half the length of their course would have their entire HELP debt wiped.
- A large, medium or small rural town for a time period equal to the whole length of their course would have their entire HELP debt wiped.
- An eligible place for a period of time equivalent to half the time required is eligible to half the applicable debt reduction.”

### **Australian-First National Guideline to Help Support Autistic Children**

On 16 February 2023 the Federal Government announced \$2 million in Commonwealth funding to the Autism Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) and commencement of work on the National Autism Strategy which will also support the implementation of this Guideline. The National Guideline with support the learning, participation and wellbeing of autistic children and their families. Media release can be found [here](#).

ICPA (Aust) has also collaborated with other services and organisations within the Allied Health field, such as National Rural Health Alliance, Sound Scouts, Disability Gateway and Minderoo Foundation. Information has been reported in both Pedals and the Federal Focus (previously the Branch Bulletin).

The Australian Government has outlined provisions in its budget for 2022-23, that focus on improving health services in rural areas. These include increased funding for medical training and new university health departments, funding for the Little Wings service, and mobile clinics in Queensland that will providing diagnosis, treatment and follow up care. More information can be found [here](#).

ICPA (Aust) continues to address these issues where appropriate and please feel free to contact us with any new issues as they arise. Once again Federal Council encourage members to approach us with new or updated case studies so it can provide greater impact to the issues our rural and remote children face.