



# Progress Report

## 2023 Federal Conference Motions

### Specific Education Needs Portfolio

Compiled March 2024

Four motions were presented and carried in the Specific Education Needs Portfolio at the 2023 Federal Conference.

#### **Federal Funding for Access to Specialists**

Following conference Federal Council wrote to the Minister for Health, Hon Mark Butler MP, recommending that financial assistance and incentives be implemented (or made available) for qualified health graduates to encourage recruitment and retention in rural and remote Australia to ensure children are receiving adequate specialist services and educational and mental health needs are met, following a motion carried at conference by members. In a response, Minister Butler acknowledged the difficulty that many communities are facing in attracting and retaining health professionals to provide local primary care services and outlined a range of current measures which the federal government has in place to attract and retain health workers, including:

- Tripling the bulk billing incentive, to support free GP consultations for 11.6 million children under 16, pensioners and other Commonwealth Concession Card holders along with other measures to address doctor availability, support the viability of general practices, and start to rebuild primary care as the core of an effective, modern healthcare system for all Australians.
- Several different government programs and incentives which doctors practising in rural areas can access including:
  - Workforce Incentives Program - Doctor Stream payments, worth up to \$60,000 per year for very remote areas, increased incentive payments through both the Rural Bulk Billing Incentive (for very remote areas worth up to 190% of the bulk billing rebate received in metropolitan locations) and rural loading of up to 50% on Practice Incentives Program payments, as well as several targeted training programs and incentives.
  - From 1 January 2024, a new Workforce Incentives Program payment - the Rural Advanced Skills payment - will be available to GPs with advanced skills in a range of disciplines (including child health and mental health) that practice in rural and remote locations.
  - Further information can be found at [www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/incentives-and-support-forgps-and-general-practices-in-mm-locations](http://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/incentives-and-support-forgps-and-general-practices-in-mm-locations).
- The National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030 (Action Plan) outlines the government's approach to improving health outcomes for all children and young people. The Action Plan recognises the difficulties experienced by communities, in accessing health services because of social, geographical and other determinants.
- The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (Children's Strategy) is guiding the federal government's investment for supporting the mental health and wellbeing needs of children and families across Australia. The government is currently implementing several key recommendations in the Children's Strategy, including the creation of a national network of Head to Health Kids Hubs (mental health and wellbeing centres), and providing access to integrated, multidisciplinary care for children 0-12 years and their families with outreach to improve access to regionally dispersed families.

#### **MBS item number for telehealth**

Federal Council also corresponded with Minister Butler regarding the need for permanent Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) item numbers for telehealth consultations for Allied Health Services, specialists and



consultations, including but not limited to Speech Pathology, Paediatricians and Psychologists, where they are not already available.

In a response the minister explained that the federal government recognises that telehealth can significantly improve access to primary and allied health care services for those living in rural and remote locations. He advised that 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), including 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. Factsheets that describe the changes to MBS telehealth are available at [www.mbsonline.gov.au](http://www.mbsonline.gov.au). The minister also highlighted that in response to recommendations from the MBS Review Taskforce (Taskforce), from 1 March 2023, several improvements will be 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, including:

- the eligible age limits will be increased from under 13 years old for assessment, and under 15 years old for treatment, to under 25 years of age for both.
- there will be an increase in the number of allied health assessment MBS services from four to eight per lifetime.
- inter-disciplinary referrals between allied professionals will be supported during the assessment phase to facilitate timely diagnosis. Fourth, the list of eligible disabilities will be expanded to include Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Lesch-Nyhan Syndrome & 22q deletion syndrome.
- expansion of access to include stuttering and Speech Sound Disorder to the list of eligible disabilities under these M10 items and this is currently being considered.

The minister also suggested that ICPA (Aust) contact private health insurers seeking benefits be paid to their members. ICPA (Aust) has already contacted Private Healthcare Australia in response to a previous motion seeking that private health insurers recognise the importance of telehealth appointments for geographically isolated children, fund telehealth services beyond COVID-19 and ensure no disparities in refunds between telehealth and face-to-face appointments.

Federal Council would appreciate feedback and case studies from members who experience issues with Medicare telehealth claims in order to substantiate further requests for expanded Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) item numbers for telehealth consultations.

### **Early Childhood Intervention Funding**

Following conference, Federal Council corresponded with Minister for the NDIS, Hon Bill Shorten MP requesting improved access and utilisation of Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) funding, currently managed through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) scheme for geographically isolated children. A response received from Minister Shorten's office acknowledged that support for children with disability and developmental delay was vitally important to have the best start in life and that the minister was committed to improving the experience of the NDIS for children and families. Further, the correspondence agreed that the NDIS plays an important part in providing children with disability and developmental delay the supports they need to meet their milestones and supports work alongside health and education systems with the child and their family to build their capacity and support greater inclusion in community and every day settings, so that each child has opportunities to grow and learn.

The minister's office also acknowledged that more needs to be done to support participants living in remote and geographically isolated areas and in response to this challenge, several measures are in place to address this, including:



- \$7.6 million has been committed in the 2023-24 budget to pilot new opportunities to improve access to supports in remote and First Nations communities, an activity expected to begin by the end of 2023.
- The NDIS commitment to remote participants also includes activities such as the Remote Community Connectors (RCC) and Remote Early Childhood Services (RECS) programs. The RCC Program is geographically expansive and supports 461 remote communities through promoting awareness, understanding and connection between participants, providers and the NDIS. The RECS Program is Kimberley-based and dedicated to supporting children younger than 7 with developmental delay or concern, or disability as early as possible.
- the NDIS Review has been tasked to specifically examine the issues of market and workforce in remote and regional areas and findings from this review will be used to inform the long-term Remote and Very Remote Strategy. The final report from this Review “Working together to deliver the NDIS” was published in December 2023 and can be found here: <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/resources/reports/working-together-deliver-ndis> .  
Recommendation fourteen of twenty-six referring directly to the need to improve access to supports for remote and First Nations participants and communities.

### **Federally Funded Health Clinics**

Once again, Federal Council corresponded with the Minister for Health, Hon Mark Butler MP on the issue of accessing Commonwealth-funded health care clinics. A response explained that the federal government funds organisations under the Indigenous Australians' Health Programme (IAHP) to provide culturally appropriate, comprehensive primary health care services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and eligibility to access health care services under the IAHP is a matter for individually funded organisations to determine at the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and/or Board level. The IAHP does not prescribe requirements around access, or eligibility of access, to IAHP funded services. It was suggested any grievances or complaints in relation to accessing health services be addressed directly to the CEO or Board of the relevant organisation in the first instance.

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