

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Australian National Audit Office

into the

Audit of Expansion of Telehealth Services

from the

**Federal Council
of the**

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.
ICPA (Aust)**

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Contact:

**Kim Hughes
Federal Secretary
ICPA (Aust)
Harrogate Station
RICHMOND QLD 4822
FedSecretary@icpa.com.au
Tel: 0427 377 985**

Contact:

**Alana Moller
Federal President
ICPA (Aust)
Star of Hope
CLERMONT QLD 4721
FedPresident@icpa.com.au
Tel: 07 4983 5353**

The Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the *Audit of Expansion of Telehealth Services* providing feedback related specifically to telehealth needs of rural and remote education and geographically isolated students.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation, which advocates on behalf of our members for equity of access to an appropriate education for all geographically isolated children and students, from early childhood through to tertiary. The majority of member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia and all share a common goal of achieving equitable access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia, often live great distances from their nearest healthcare services.

The key message which ICPA (Aust) continues to promote across all components of our advocacy is equitable access to educational opportunities for geographically isolated students. This includes access to equitable and adequate health services, including Allied Health, required to address conditions affecting the ability of students to succeed at learning. Often in rural and remote areas of Australia adequate healthcare services are hard to have access to in person. Telehealth in rural and remote areas can be a successful adjunct to provision of appropriate services.

ICPA (Aust) has had motions carried at our annual Federal Conferences requesting the extension of the Medicare rebate to include children using telehealth for all areas of allied health. Early intervention and ongoing consistent health services for rural and remote students will ultimately help these students get better outcomes in their education, especially when we look at the statistics presented by the Royal Far West¹;

- Children in rural, regional and remote areas are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than children in metropolitan areas – 27% of all children in outer regional, remote and very remote areas compared to 21% in towns and cities.
- Children living in Very Remote areas are twice as likely as those living in Major Cities to be developmentally vulnerable.
- More than 1 in 6 (16.2%) children and adolescents aged 4-17 in rural areas have mental health problems. The highest prevalence is in Outer Regional areas (19% of children and adolescents).
- 32% of children in regional, rural or remote NSW are unable to access the health services they need

Based on the statistics above ICPA (Aust) believes Medicare funded telehealth can significantly contribute to alleviating the educational gap for rural and remote children, when used as an adjunct to face to face consultations for all children in rural and remote areas.

Was the expansion informed by robust planning and policy advice?

ICPA (Aust) has been calling for policy change in the area of telehealth for rural and remote children for many years. During the pandemic, the expansion of telehealth was undertaken rapidly and with relative ease and ICPA (Aust) welcome the audit and analysis of the evaluation to identify if similar telehealth protocols can be permanently established to enable rural and remote children and their families to access otherwise inaccessible services.

¹ Royal Far West, POSITION PAPER – JULY 2017 SUPPORTING CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA, Key Facts and Figures, page 1 from <https://www.royalfarwest.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RFW-Policy-Paper-Supporting-childhood-development-in-regional-and-rural-Australia-July-2017.pdf> on 28th May 2021

Was the expansion supported by sound implementation arrangements?

One of the key areas that ICPA (Aust) believes is impractical for rural and remote children is 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 and the long distances rural and remote children are from the nearest GP makes these restrictions extremely challenging for rural and remote families and result in extensive delays and increased expense at the detriment of the timely and satisfactory treatment and development of a child.

Has monitoring and evaluation of the expansion led to improvements?

ICPA (Aust) would like to note that rural and remote students have unique needs in comparison to metropolitan children, due to the barriers of accessibilities and lack of healthcare professionals in rural and remote areas. Therefore, monitoring and evaluating rural and remote students might show different outcomes particularly in Allied Health Services than those in metropolitan areas. ICPA (Aust) recommends that this be taken into consideration in any analysis of the evaluation.

ICPA (Aust) has welcomed the introduction of more Medicare rebate telehealth Allied Health Services and believes this will help provide better educational outcomes for children living in rural and remote Australia.

Once again ICPA (Aust) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this Audit.