



28 February 2022

Chronic pain patients lose out in \$40 million government cut to Australian pain services

The Federal Government has cut \$40 million from desperately needed services for people living with chronic pain after it rejected key recommendations from a national taskforce, according to leading specialist pain medicine physicians.

The Dean of the Faculty of Pain Medicine of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists, Associate Professor Mick Vagg, says the government has passed up a “once in a generation opportunity” to improve access services for the one in five Australians now living with chronic pain.

“Chronic pain patients, many of whom have already experienced long delays in their treatment because of the COVID-19 pandemic, will be worse off from 1 March.”

The faculty has written to federal Health Minister Greg Hunt about its concerns and will be engaging with all political parties in the lead-up to the federal election including the non-partisan group of MPs and senators in Canberra known as the Parliamentary Friends of Pain Management Group, and other key stakeholders.

The government-appointed Pain Management Clinical Committee reviewed pain related medical treatment “item numbers” and reported to the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) Taskforce late last year.

The committee, which included faculty representatives, recommended that Medicare funding be shifted from hospital-based care and proposed new item numbers for community based pain treatment group programs. This was rejected by the taskforce. If adopted it would have streamlined the GP referral process for chronic pain patients and supported the establishment of teams of healthcare professionals who could provide much-needed best-practice care.

Associate Professor Vagg said the potential for cost increases with the introduction of new item numbers was planned to be offset by shifting Medicare funding away from low-value procedures towards best-practice pain management in a multidisciplinary team. Such services are currently provided almost exclusively by hospital-based organisations.

“Even before the pandemic chronic pain patients without health insurance regularly faced delays of up to two years to access public hospital specialist pain clinics,” Associate Professor Vagg said.

“The Commonwealth has, in effect, banked \$40 million in savings and ignored a recommendation to introduce more balanced and effective rebates. This means the public system, already overburdened by the COVID-19 pandemic, will become further strained. The lack of implementation of the recommendations cripples the ability of the private sector to help reduce waiting times. Without the item numbers that were recommended, new community-based pain treatment services are never going to be viable.

“The decision is effectively a cut of \$40 million to pain services and will have a significant impact on some of the most marginalised patients in the community.”

The Faculty of Pain Medicine is the professional organisation for specialist pain medicine physicians and specialist pain medicine physicians in training. The faculty is responsible for the training, examination and specialist accreditation of specialist pain medicine physicians and for the standards of clinical practice for pain medicine in Australia and New Zealand.