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Federal Government urged to tackle mental health and wellbeing crisis by investing in social prescribing

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP), Consumer Health Forum of Australia (CHF) and Mental Health Australia are urging the government to implement a national social prescribing scheme to tackle Australia's mental health and wellbeing crisis in the 2021 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO).

Mental ill health is a growing problem in Australia and has been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2017, GPs across Australia have rated mental health as the most common presentation they see as part of the RACGP's annual Health of the Nation survey. Medicare data also shows the increase in patients accessing mental health services during the pandemic, with services highest in July 2020 when Victoria's second wave peaked. We also know that approximately 20% of patients consult their GP for what are primarily social problems.

The RACGP, CHF and Mental Health Australia are calling on the Australian Government to support the development of a nationally coordinated scheme dedicated to tackling the problem with innovative local solutions.

Social prescribing is about health and wellbeing support. It involves a health professional supporting a patient to take up non-medical activities and services to supplement conventional healthcare. It aims to address the key risk factors for poor health, including mental health problems, social isolation, and chronic illness. It has been shown to deliver positive health benefits and improved self-care capability.

A 2019 survey conducted by RACGP and CHF found over 90% of GPs and allied health professionals believe that referring patients to non-medical services in the community is extremely helpful for improving health outcomes. 68% of consumers say they are interested in participating in community programs to address health and wellbeing issues.

RACGP President Dr Karen Price said the need for a national scheme was clear.

"As we tackle the ongoing pandemic and transition to COVID normal, we must address the considerable social, mental and physical health impacts on our community," she said.

"GPs are seeing more and more patients presenting with mental health and wellbeing concerns, they're lonely, isolated, and not active. It's very concerning because we know these problems are key risk factors for poor health – people who are experiencing loneliness, for example, are more at risk of their physical health declining.

CHF CEO Leanne Wells said social prescribing is a vital development for patients and was recommended by CHF's 2020 Consumer Commission as a solution to the many fault lines in our health system exposed by COVID.

"Social prescribing is a way of delivering truly person-centred, comprehensive care that embraces social and lifestyle risk factor management support as well as conventional medical care"

"We need an innovative approach to tackle this problem, because Australia's health system is already buckling under the enormous pressure of dealing with rising COVID-19 cases, as well as a backlog from patients who delayed care in lockdown.

"A nationally coordinated approach to social wellbeing and support will ease the burden on our hospital system and help to keep patients happy and healthy in our community.



RACGP

Royal Australian College of General Practitioners

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Australia

“A growing body of evidence and international experience shows that modest investment in a social prescribing scheme will harness existing community and social services to better support Australians with their mental and physical health needs and improve their self-care capability

“That’s the key, we already have great activities and services existing in our communities, we just need to establish a formal structure and links to GPs and other health professionals who can support patients in need to access them.

“It might sound like a small thing, but it will make a big difference in improving peoples’ mental and physical health, while also reducing the burden on health services.”

Mental Health Australia CEO Dr Leanne Beagley said a national approach to social prescribing needs to be considered when finalising, and then implementing, the forthcoming National Agreement for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention.

“Social prescribing is about how best to deal with mental health, and illness, at a community level,” said Dr Beagley.

“It is about understanding what a person needs in addressing their health problems which often goes beyond clinical interventions to the heart of wellbeing - and that is social connection.

“To join with the RACGP and CHF to advocate for a national approach to social prescribing is an important pillar of our national advocacy approach to ensure people with lived experience continue to have an effective voice and improve our mental health system through person led co-design.”

~ENDS

Interviews are available.