



The Hon. Greg Hunt MP

Minister for Health

Minister Assisting the Prime Minister
for the Public Service and Cabinet

TRANSCRIPT

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Interview with Chris Kenny
Sky News Australia

E&OE...

Topics: Royal Commission into Aged Care; Mental health Productivity Commission; Private Health Insurance; Drought.

CHRIS KENNY:

The Health Minister Greg Hunt is with us live now, joining us from Perth.

Thanks for joining us Minister. Just on that (inaudible), first up on aged care, obviously it's not your direct responsibility as the Health Minister, but the argument put there by the chief advocate for Seniors Australia that what Australia needs to do is focus much more heavily on care for the elderly in their homes rather than sending them off to institutionalised care.

GREG HUNT:

So we'll receive the royal commission report later today and I will be briefed on it just before it's released publicly, so I won't pre-empt what might be in that report, but I do say this, that we called the commission because we were deeply concerned.

And the Prime Minister and the Cabinet were deeply concerned about aged care, we wanted to shine a light on the system both to look at any individual cases coming as you well know out of the scandal of Oakden, which occurred in South Australia under the State Labor Government, but also at (inaudible) inadequate treatment around the country and systemic reforms.

We don't walk into something like this without realising that there are challenges, that's why we did it.

In the meantime, we've got on and appointed an Aged Care Quality and Safety Commissioner, instituted spot checks around the country, delivered new standards, delivered new quality indicators that are mandatory.

As well as I think to go straight to your point, increased by 25 per cent in the last year alone, the number of home care places.

So home care for those that may not be involved with the system is where people are able to get the support at home, rather than living within a nursing home or a residential aged care facility.

There is a national trend where people understandably are living longer, they're preferring to stay at home and so we're in the process of increasing, over the current period, the number of home care places by a 160 per cent, so a dramatic increase.

But (inaudible) to the report and their job was to be frank and fearless and that's what I think has come through the evidence, some deeply concerning cases around the country and we called it because we were concerned.

CHRIS KENNY:

No, you're right. Of course you've got to see the report before you get into the detail of your response, and it's not your direct responsibility and you mentioned quite rightly that your government and others have done more to put in place these home care services.

But do you agree that that is the thrust that policy might need to go in the future?

That because of cost imperatives and the wishes of people, that there might be a lot more government action required there because while you've increased places, the reports are that the waiting lists for these places is much longer, much greater than the additional costs- the additional packages available.

GREG HUNT:

There's no question that home care has been and must continue to grow.

So we've effectively doubled the number of places from 60,000 to 125,000, but that's continuing to grow and we'll continue to invest in that space.

In addition to that there's a level below that for people with lesser needs called home support, and hundreds of thousands of Australians also benefit from home support.

And one of the things we'll be looking at, and I hope the royal commission addresses, is the relationship between residential care, home care and home support.

So we have a very simply continuum that people are able to get the support right across all three levels.

And we've been adding an extra billion dollars a year, but we know that this great transformation, the aging population that has been a demographic fact is now with us and it's been foreseen and we're adapting to it.

But it is a profound national challenge and that's (inaudible) called to highlight the flaws, to identify the needs and to help chart the pathways fearlessly.

CHRIS KENNY:

Greg Hunt, here's a big focus today nationally on mental health a Productivity Commission report talking about 3.9 million Australians being affected by some sort of mental health condition and it costing the economy hundreds of millions of dollars a day.

Authorised by Greg Hunt MP, Liberal Party of Australia, Somerville, Victoria.

What is going wrong with our state of health in this country and the way we're dealing with it?

GREG HUNT:

Well I think what the report highlights is that what we've also been saying, it's very consistent with what the Government have been saying, what I've been saying, is that mental health can strike anybody.

There are almost 4 million Australians in any one year who face a mental health challenge. It could be anxiety or depression, bipolar, schizophrenia and this can be a deep profound challenge.

And so what we are putting to the states, I'm in Perth today for the Council of Australian Government health ministers meeting, (inaudible) working in partnership for the first time, a true national partnership for an integrated mental health system, from developing resilience and prevention in young people to early diagnosis, early and better treatment.

Support in the hospital system, particularly youth mental health wards, which I do hope that the states will take up, and then recovery for those people who've been discharged from hospital. We should be tracking, with the consent of individuals, with support services for every single person in Australia who's been discharged from a state hospital for suicidality or suicide attempt when they're in the recovery phase.

And it's one of the things that I've identified and one of the points of the Productivity Commission has been the way in which we support people after they have been discharged.

And so this is I think a profoundly important report.

It's (inaudible) at this stage, it's seeking comment, it's not their final report, but I think there's much in there which is very valuable.

And at the same time I want to note that what we are world-leading in our youth mental health services.

headspace is a world leading program and we've been investing \$375 million in that, and we'll continue to support and expand the headspace network as a principle, national bulwark and as an asset which helps every Australian family know there's a place to go.

CHRIS KENNY:

I think we all support the aims here, we can all see the problems with suicide with some of the medical issues at our hospitals and elsewhere and drug use and other issues in our society.

But are you worried given there's so much public debate and focus on this now, we could be medicalising a problem too often or too readily, when perhaps counselling, family support, general resilience might intercept a lot of people?

GREG HUNT:

Look to be fair to the Productivity Commission, one of their important emphases is on exactly what you're saying; prevention and resilience.

Building in young people but not just young people, people in all walks of life, the skills to cope with some of the challenges, to recognise that there are issues that are emerging and then to be able to understand how do people manage themselves?

How do they cope with these challenges?

Authorised by Greg Hunt MP, Liberal Party of Australia, Somerville, Victoria.

But then also to overcome what is one of the greatest barriers and that is self-stigma.

As a nation we have made enormous inroads on dealing with community stigma, the criticism of others.

But self-stigma is where you or I feel unable to seek help because we're afraid of how others might perceive us and that's not needed but it's very much a reality.

And so (inaudible) early, then it prevents this bottling up, it prevents the erosion, it prevents the deep dwelling, which can be a profound component of acute mental health conditions.

And so that early prevention, that early intervention of giving people the confidence to seek help, they couple together and the commission - the Productivity Commission - has done an important job in highlighting them.

CHRIS KENNY:

Greg Hunt, just two other issues if I could get to some feedback from you before we let you go.

One is the push we're seeing now from the private health insurance industry and others, the GP section of the Australian Medical Association and the like, looking to extend the reach of private health cover so that it can cover more medical procedures delivered out and about away from hospitals by GP's.

Are you looking, examining at the possibility of a reform here?

GREG HUNT:

(inaudible) at what's called Hospital in the Home and I've invited the hospitals, the private health insurers, the AMA and other medical bodies to work together to put forward proposals, with technology, with Telehealth, with all of these things in just the same way that you were talking about homecare for aged care, there's both the capacity and a desire for more treatments to be provided for what are called outpatients who are people not within the actual hospital themselves.

And there is an opportunity to do that and that will often produce better outcomes, particularly in the case of mental health and orthopaedic recovery.

Those are the two leading examples which have been cited by the health and medical sector and the community.

And so I think there is more that can be done because you have some old rules which simply confine the system to treatment in hospital.

And if we can allow that (inaudible), but we can also have a more efficient system, which means that rare combination of better outcomes but helping to be able to control any change in private health premiums which is a pretty important direction for the country.

CHRIS KENNY:

Now when we're talking in mental health there is a direct link to the drought crisis that's gripping much of eastern Australia.

So it must be enormously frustrating for you and other members of the Government while you're trying to focus on that drought problem, which is a problem of agriculture, lifestyle, financial support and of course, community and mental health, while you're trying to tackle that you've got your Nationals partners tearing themselves apart about who's getting the credit and not even ruling out a leadership tilts at the deputy leader.

GREG HUNT:

Look, my role in all of this is just to focus on the families and the communities in rural and regional Australia. And (inaudible) those discussions over my time in Parliament, and respectfully, I'm not about to change that. I know in talking with Michael-

CHRIS KENNY:

Would you encourage them to at least focus on the main game then? They are your colleagues, your partners.

GREG HUNT:

My message to all my colleagues at all times is always to focus on the public, so that hasn't changed in my time and I don't see it ever changing whilst I have the privilege to be involved in public life.

And at the end of the day, our task is to provide the support for farmers in Queensland and New South Wales and other parts of Australia that are experiencing drought.

I know in my own home state of Victoria there are communities where farmers are doing it tough, their families are doing it tough, their- small towns are doing it tough and our task is to help them immediately, to help the communities such as through the Local Government Support Grants that we've provided, I think over (inaudible).

And then to ensure that there is the resilience within those communities to be there to recover for when the rain returns. And I have heard some reports that there are parts of Australia that are getting good rains which haven't had it for quite a while (inaudible).

CHRIS KENNY:

They are indeed, it's raining at Longreach I'm told - we're going to across up there later this hour. Thanks so much for joining us Greg, I appreciate it.

GREG HUNT:

Well there you go, that's a happy note to finish on.

CHRIS KENNY:

Indeed.

GREG HUNT:

Take care mate.

CHRIS KENNY:

That's the Health Minister Greg Hunt there, joining us live from Perth.

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