

Media Release

Wednesday, 15 May 2024

PHN welcomes bolstering of bulk billed services

South Western Sydney residents will benefit from a boost in funding for additional Medicare Urgent Care Clinics and a network of new Medicare Mental Health Centres – two of the standout commitments from last night's Federal Budget.

In handing down the government's third budget, Treasurer Jim Chalmers said overall spending on health and aged care in 2024-25 would be \$146.1 billion, including investments to strengthen Medicare (\$2.8 billion), deliver cheaper medicines (\$4.3 billion) and invest in a fit and healthy Australia (\$1.3 billion).

The government committed \$227 million in last night's budget to increase the number of Medicare Urgent Care Clinics by 29 to 87, enabling more patients to receive fully-bulk billed urgent care from GPs or nurses in more locations.

A \$361 million boost over four years to the range of free mental health services was also announced, including funding for 61 walk-in Medicare Mental Health Centres, building on the established Head to Health network. The centres will provide free, walk-in access to a psychologist or psychiatrist for adults with complex and high mental health needs.

This investment includes funding Primary Health Networks to work in partnership with general practice to provide mental health nurses and other allied health workers, for free wraparound care and support to patients with complex needs, in between GP and specialist appointments.

South Western Sydney PHN Chief Executive Officer, Dr Keith McDonald PhD, said the bolstering of access to bulk-billed services both through Urgent Care Clinics and new mental health measures was welcome at a time when the cost of living was impacting access to healthcare.

Dr McDonald said the Australia Bureau of Statistics found the proportion of people who reported delaying or not going to a GP due to the cost grew from 7 per cent 2022-23 compared to 3.5 per cent in 2021-22.

"South Western Sydney was lucky enough to benefit from the opening of a Medicare Urgent Care Clinic (UCC) at Campbelltown Medical and Dental last December," he said.

"The UCC has made it easier for local residents to access free, high quality care from highly trained GPs and nurses, while freeing up emergency departments to focus on life threatening emergencies," he said.

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South Western Sydney PHN is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting general practitioners, practice nurses and other primary health providers to deliver the best possible care for their patients. Our aim is to improve access to quality local healthcare for all residents living in the Bankstown, Fairfield, Liverpool, Campbelltown, Camden, Wollondilly and Wingecarribee LGAs, areas which include but are not exclusive to the major traditional nations of Dharawal (Tharawal) and Gundangarra (Gandangara).

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the waters and lands on which we live and work, and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

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“We’re looking forward to future announcements about the expansion of the network to additional sites across our region.”

Other announcements of note in last night’s budget include:

- \$91.1 million to boost the supply of healthcare in areas of shortage, including Primary Health Networks supporting health services at risk of closing.
- \$882.2 million to ensure older people get the medical support they need. This includes funding to upskill the residential aged care workforce and provide virtual care services, and deliver complex care for older people outside of the hospital.
- From 1 August 2024, people in residential aged care will be more likely to receive quality and continuous care from a GP, with GPs and practices eligible to receive quarterly incentive payments, on top of Medicare rebates, to manage the health of their MyMedicare registered residents.
- \$1.4 billion to upgrade technology systems and digital infrastructure across the aged care sector in preparation for the new Aged Care Act.
- \$38.8 million for people aged 45 to 49 to join already eligible 50 to 74-year-olds in screening for bowel cancer by requesting a free test kit.
- \$598.9 million for the continuation of the National COVID-19 Vaccine Program to enable vaccinations to prevent severe COVID-19 disease.
- \$588.5 million over eight years for a national low intensity digital mental health service, which is free of charge and free of need for referral.
- \$35.9 million over four years to extend terminating mental health measures, to enhance the delivery of mental health and suicide prevention services and to provide greater funding certainty for service providers. \$21 million of this will fund the PHN Targeted Regional Initiatives for Suicide Prevention (TRISP) for 2024-25.
- Indexation on Medicare Benefits Schedule rebates is expected to deliver almost \$900 million in additional benefits in 2024-25. This is on top of around \$940 million in additional Medicare benefits already delivered in 2023-24.
- Students in nursing, midwifery and social work will benefit from the establishment of a Commonwealth Prac Payment. This will support them while they undertake mandatory placements required for higher education and vocational education and training qualifications. Eligible students will be able to access \$319.50 per week during their clinical and professional placement periods.

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