



The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing on behalf of the Catholic Hospital sector regarding the expected discontinuation of MBS items for telehealth beyond September 2020.

Catholic Health Australia (CHA) commends the Government's rapid response to the COVID-19 outbreak and the measures enacted to protect the health and safety of our community, particularly our most vulnerable populations. Of those public health measures, expanding MBS telehealth items has proved a lifeline through the COVID-19 pandemic.

From March 2020, the Department of Health introduced new telehealth items for health professionals to help reduce the risk of community transmission of COVID-19 while ensuring continued access to essential care. This list has appropriately broadened over the course of the pandemic response efforts.

With the introduction of the new MBS items, telehealth services have been widely used in lieu of face to face patient interactions across many Catholic health services, including pre-admission consults, post-natal support, outpatient consults for chronic diseases, and a wide range of rehabilitation, mental health and other community-based services, including social outreach programs and disability services.

Telehealth services, when delivered appropriately, achieve the quadruple aims of healthcare – not only are they cost effective and overall improve patient outcomes, but they improve patient and clinician experience by reducing barriers to accessing timely care. Initial feedback from patients has been overwhelmingly positive and demonstrates that our communities support the use of telehealth so they can access safe, convenient care from either their home or work environment. Our sector has reported lower cancellation rates and higher satisfaction rates for patients who do not need to attend face to face appointments thus improving productivity for both the service providers and patients. Similarly so with clinicians: in a survey conducted by the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP), 75% of physicians perceived the availability of





these new items have increased accessibility of services to patients and 87% of responding physicians supported retaining the new telehealth items. Importantly, telehealth services appear to be of most benefit to the poor, vulnerable and marginalised in our community, providing access to services where it is most needed.

In addition to continuing the current MBS list of telehealth services, CHA suggests that the Government should consider expanding this list to include admitted patient services delivered in non-hospital settings, and other community based services. There are many circumstances where telehealth can contribute to better admitted patient care, including to maintain an established therapeutic relationship which contributes to the patients' continuity of care; when there is a lack of alternative treating specialists (as is common in regional and remote areas); and when travel, work and family commitments and wellness barriers restrict access to attending services face to face. CHA recommends the application of these telehealth items for admitted patients under the same principles that apply to outpatients to support timely access to health services and prevent unnecessary risks to the health and safety of patients and clinicians.

Following decades of consultations, reviews and reports, telehealth services are finally available to all Australians, brought on by a global pandemic. Whilst telehealth services will never fully replace face to face services, they are now proving to be all that they promised, hitting the quadruple health aims of better or equitable outcomes, value for money, and clinician and patient choice and satisfaction. They should be here to stay and CHA strongly urges the Government to make telehealth part of Australia's health landscape beyond September 2020.

For further information on the contents of this letter, please contact Mr James Kemp, CHA Director Health Policy, on 0414 973 573.

Yours sincerely,

Pat Garcia
Chief Executive Officer
Catholic Health Australia

24 June 2020

cc The Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health

