

**2023**

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**Bulk billing general practice services – Access**

**Assembly Resolution of 29 June 2023 - Government Response**

**Presented by  
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30 November 2023**



The ACT Government is committed to continuing to partner with the Commonwealth Government, Capital Health Network and primary care providers to improve the delivery of high quality, accessible primary healthcare. Primary care services are the most used healthcare service by Australians, and the ACT has the lowest overall rates of bulk billed general practitioner (GP) non-referred attendance services in Australia.

The Commonwealth Government holds the responsibility for funding and setting policy for primary care in Australia. This includes setting the rebate amount offered to patients for seeing a GP. In the ACT, most practices adopt a mixed billing model, which means they will both privately bill and provide bulk billing, that is, services that are free at the point of care. The decision about whether to bulk bill is made by the individual GP at the time of seeing the patient, according to the unique circumstances of their patient. For example, individual GPs may decide to bulk bill every second or third visit for those with a chronic condition. Or a practice may adopt a policy to always bulk bill a certain cohort such as young children, or those with a healthcare card.

While most general practices have broad billing policies, which are commonly advertised on their websites and occasionally through centralised information services, there are often nuanced decisions about billing that occur in a relationship-based, long-term care context that cannot be captured in generalised digital platforms like apps and online booking services.

The issue of primary care and bulk billing access has been raised regularly by health ministers through various national forums including the Health Ministers' Meeting and National Cabinet in recent years. In response to the Assembly's motion, I wrote to the Hon Mark Butler MP, Commonwealth Minister for Health and Aged Care. In my letter, I asked Minister Butler to consider expanding the offerings of the Medical Cost Finder Tool to include GP services to assist with finding information about bulk billing, and to expand the services delivered by Healthdirect, given these services are already publicly funded.

While primary healthcare funding is a responsibility of the Commonwealth Government, the ACT Government is taking action, both in collaboration with the Commonwealth and through our own initiatives, to improve access to primary healthcare. Since 2017, more than \$16 million has been invested in primary care initiatives in the ACT. This is to ensure better care for all Canberrans, and especially for people experiencing disadvantage or with complex needs who face barriers to accessing timely, high-quality healthcare.

### **Delivering Better Care initiatives**

Under the 2019-20 and 2022-23 "Delivering Better Care for Canberrans with Complex Needs" Budget Measures, the ACT Government allocated \$5.75 million over seven years to community sector organisations to boost primary care access. This funding has supported community services to provide accessible and affordable primary care, including for those experiencing homelessness, alcohol and drug dependencies, refugees and asylum seekers and young people at risk.

This includes the Chat to PAT mobile clinic, which provides wrap-around primary care to disadvantaged cohorts in various locations across Canberra. The external evaluation demonstrated its effectiveness, with a key strength being GPs and nursing staff providing consistent and non-judgemental care, 'meeting people where they're at', with counselling support and successfully improving access to integrated care.

Through these measures, the ACT Government also allocated funding through a grants program for innovative integrated care projects. These innovative integrated care projects worked with or through General Practitioners to support vulnerable Canberrans with complex health needs. In 2022, this grants program awarded a total \$910,000 in grants, including a \$100,000 contribution from the Capital Health Network (CHN), towards four local organisations:

1. Meridian to establish a culturally safe, gender-affirming primary healthcare clinic;
2. Next Practice is providing integrated primary care for up to 250 housebound ACT residents with complex and chronic healthcare needs;
3. Anglicare Junction has established a mobile health clinic for young people aged 12 to 25 years who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness; and
4. Companion House is recruiting local general practices to take referrals of people from a refugee background who have experienced torture and trauma.

### **The Canberra After Hours Locum Medical Service, Walk in Centres, and Urgent Care Centres**

The ACT Government has also supported the ACT's only publicly funded after-hours GP service since the 1970s, the Canberra After Hours Locum Medical Service (CALMS). CALMS is a long-running, well-known, and trusted service, and plays a key role in the sustainability and access of General Practice in the ACT.

The ACT Government has established an ACT-wide network of nurse-led Walk-in Centres in five locations across the ACT as an Emergency Department diversion measure to treat low acuity illnesses and injuries, with healthcare that is both free for patients and available after-hours.

With support from the Commonwealth, the ACT Government has recently expanded the nurse-led Walk-in Centres to provide more free health services to people when they need it.

### **Primary Care Pilot**

As part of the Commonwealth-funded Primary Care Pilots initiative, the ACT Government is leading a health system collaborative to test an innovative model of primary care delivery.

An ACT Primary Care Pilot has been co-designed by the Health Directorate, Canberra Health Services and Capital Health Network. Canberra Health Services and participating GPs will identify 700-750 patients with complex health needs and enrol them in a 12-week trial, where they will be eligible for free appointments with the GP and allied health professionals. The GP will also be able to access support from specialists at the hospital through a virtual support service.

Better coordinating the care of these patients, and providing free access to the range of health services they require, aims to reduce their need to go to the Emergency Department or hospital and improve their health outcomes.

Participating general practices will receive funding to cover the administrative costs of identifying patients, and per-patient costs to support coordinated care planning, provision of free-at-point-of-care consultations, and GP time accessing the medical specialist virtual support service.

The Pilot aims to improve the health outcomes of participating consumers through the early recognition of their potential deterioration, the provision of a holistic care plan inclusive of health and social services, and free at point-of-care treatment.

This Pilot will also help us try, test and learn as we continue to pursue the goal of a more integrated, patient-centred health system where clinicians are able to work to their full scope of practice.

### **Value and usage of centralised information services**

There are a range of services that provide centralised information on healthcare services and the Assembly Resolution discussed how the ACT Government might consider promoting the use of these services by consumers and general practices.

For many people, centralised online or digital information platforms can be highly beneficial in providing current, localised information about healthcare services.

The ACT Government, in conjunction with all Australian states and territories, is an active shareholder of Healthdirect Australia, co-funding its Health Information Advisory Service and the National Health Services Directory. The ACT works closely with Healthdirect to help address key priorities and challenges across the health sector, and to provide data, services and information to healthcare consumers.

Healthdirect is accountable to the Commonwealth, state and territory governments as its shareholders and customers. The ACT Government's agreements with Healthdirect include provisions for collaboration on access and use of data. These arrangements ensure transparency and accountability. For this reason, the ACT Government recommends and promotes Healthdirect's services for consumers and general practices in the ACT. ACT Health's 'Find a Health Service' website links directly to Healthdirect's National Health Services Directory.

There are also some other highly-valued community services that provide comprehensive information about services specifically for the ACT.

The ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service provides a health directory of bulk billing general practitioner clinics in the ACT. The website also provides a list of mixed billing practices.

The Canberra Health Literacy website, developed by the Health Care Consumers' Association with support from the ACT Government, is a central point for health literacy information, resources, and training for the ACT. It has information and resources for consumers, and for people who work for health and community services. The Health Care Consumers' Association also developed a factsheet in 2022 on "Stretching your health dollar" which includes information targeted at consumers on locating bulk billing services.

There are a variety of different services available for Canberrans and I encourage all Canberrans to use the services that work best for their personal circumstances. I will continue to advocate across interjurisdictional bodies to get better information for consumers when they need it to ensure all Canberrans have access to high-quality, accessible healthcare and information in the right place, at the right time.