

Steve Doszpot MLA
Chair – Standing Committee on Health, Community and Social Services
GPO Box 1020
Canberra ACT 2601
By email

Dear Mr Doszpot,

ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) and Health Care Consumers Association ACT (HCCA) feel it is important to highlight recent changes, since our initial submissions to the Inquiry into Primary Health Care Services, which will make it even more difficult for people experiencing disadvantage in the ACT to access General Practitioners (GPs). We urge the Committee to take into account the recent developments and appreciate the increasing urgency of the situation.

In our initial submissions, ACTCOSS and HCCA highlighted the range of problems facing consumers accessing GPs in Canberra, including:

- The low rates of GPs per capita in the ACT;
- The low rate of bulk-billing by ACT GPs;
- The cost of accessing primary health care;
- The limited access points to primary health care;
- Physical access to primary health care, including transport and locational barriers.

In August, two of Canberra's biggest medical centres, privately owned by the one company, announced they would be limiting bulk-billing for many patients and introducing fees for adult consumers who do not have a health care concession card.

The HCCA GP Snapshot 2009 surveyed 635 people in the ACT community in the ACT region regarding their experiences and expectations of GPs in Canberra. Although many respondents indicated lower levels of satisfaction with larger medical practices than small local practices, many felt they were still a good option when urgent attention was required or the matter did not require ongoing treatment. The difficulties in gaining an appointment in a short time frame, and the costs of practices that do not bulk-bill means it is difficult for many consumers to access their local practice when required.

It is clear from submissions to the Inquiry that lack of money is a barrier to many people in the ACT accessing sufficient and appropriate health care (see, for example, the submission by Carers ACT regarding the barriers facing carers). ACTCOSS and HCCA are concerned that the decision of the major clinics will further limit the options available to many people already experiencing disadvantage, including single parents, students and people on low incomes. We anticipate that people who cannot afford the co-payments will

be forced to attend already overburdened emergency departments or not seek treatment at all.

The ACT Government has indicated there is little they can do in response to the situation, as bulk billing is a matter for the Commonwealth, and the medical centres are private companies. However, ACTCOSS and HCCA feel as the situation continues to worsen for health care consumers in the ACT it becomes even more important for the ACT Government to consider alternative and innovative models of health care.

We refer you to the submissions already made to the Inquiry by HCCA and ACTCOSS which provide a range of recommendations about more innovative ways to deliver healthcare, including better integrating healthdirect into primary care and expanding the role of existing health care professionals in the delivery of primary care.

We look forward to continuing to work with the committee and the ACT Government in addressing the challenges facing consumers in the ACT in the access to primary health care.

Yours sincerely,



Roslyn Dundas
Director
ACT Council of Social Service



Darlene Cox
Executive Director
Health Care Consumers Association

8 September 2009