

Response from Healthscope Limited to the Inquiry into Access to Primary Health Care Service by the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Health, Community and Social Services

Healthscope in responding to the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Health, Community and Social Services inquiry into access to primary health care services has chosen to focus its comments on how it believes General Practitioners (GPs) can be encouraged to continue to practice in the ACT.

Our response is based on our recent insight in attracting doctors and opening a successful General Practice at Belconnen.

Reasons pertaining to the level of shortage of GPs in the ACT

In conversations with GPs, it became apparent many felt their one to three doctor medical practices were not sustainable in the long run. The GPs expressed concerns about feeling stressed, unsupported and over-worked, citing the following:

- An inability to take a holiday as there was no leave cover. Locums were not available, leaving the GP frustrated and over-extended. There was genuine concern that their patients be looked after appropriately in their absence.
- The increasing burden of paperwork, often with changing rules. The GPs complained of the onerous demand to contend with mountains of paperwork, much of which they perceived to be incomprehensible as the rules / definitions continually change, eg Enhanced Primary Care submissions for chronic care outcomes, changing Medicare codes, etc. A failure to properly submit the paperwork could adversely affect reimbursement adding another dimension of stress.
- Billing demands. A small practice is burdened with paper and electronic submissions that are critical to practice viability. The billing requires a unique knowledge of changing coding requirements.
- Inadequate or outdated IT systems. GPs were faced with an ever-increasing need for IT systems to support patient care and billing. The systems are costly for a one-person practice and some GPs do not possess the technical skills to manage or maintain the software / hardware.
- Limited clinical resources for patients eg, nurse educators, allied health, etc. GPs mentioned that it was difficult to arrange necessary allied health appointments for patients, especially those with chronic diseases (eg, diabetes, asthma, etc). Either patients had to travel to another site to be seen by a dietitian, nurse educator, physiotherapist, or the Allied Health personnel had to waste valuable time driving from one small practice to another, and then only on certain days for a limited time. Generally the situation was not satisfactory / convenient for the GP, the Allied Health staff or the patient.

As the problems facing the GP in a small practice were perceived to be insurmountable, they were contemplating whether to leave, take early retirement or join a larger practice, rather than continue in a worsening situation.

Strategies to attract and retain GPs in suburban practices – the Healthscope model

Healthscope has successfully attracted 14 GPs from 7 ACT practices to the North Canberra Family Practice located in Belconnen.

A salient feature of the model is that the practice is “doctor-driven” – the doctors themselves determine how they practice within a professional supportive environment.

The 14 GPs comprise a sufficiently large group to have sustainable economies of scale, enabling services and staffing previously insupportable in a small practice. A team of receptionists / appointment secretaries, office manager and billing staff relieve the GPs of onerous paperwork, so that they can devote their time to patient care. The billing staff are trained and experienced and keep abreast of changes as they are made known, ensuring that billing is performed correctly and in a timely fashion.

Leave coverage from amongst the GPs is easily arranged, freeing up each GP to take leave at their convenience, confident in the knowledge that their patients are well cared for.

The medical centre also creates a clinical environment in which GPs, nursing, allied health and pathology staff can work collaboratively for the benefit of the patient.

The medical centre provides GPs with an IT system with information back-up and technical support including:

- EPC Templates
- Computerised patient records
- Therapeutic guidelines
- Patient information sheets

Summary

In summary, the Healthscope model for primary care is based on the assumption that to retain and recruit doctors you need to create an environment that assists the doctors to concentrate on patient care, while confident that they are supported in their care delivery by other health professionals and well trained administration staff. It would be the Healthscope observation that many of the problems, which lead GPs to close their practices, can be obviated within the setting of a well-managed larger medical practice. As one of the North Canberra GPs recently stated, the Healthscope centre has “enabled me to prolong my work life”.

I sincerely hope that this information is of benefit to the Committee.

Andrew Sando
Chief Operating Officer, Medical Centres