Budget leaves Australians hungry for change - Media release

Dietitians Australia welcomes the increase in the basic daily fee for aged care homes, announced as a part of the Federal Government's 2021-22 budget.

But without mandatory malnutrition screening, this is money down the drain.

"It appears the government is not concerned about the rising malnutrition rates in this country. How can we sit idly by when we know that almost 4000 Australians living in aged care were hospitalised over a 12-month period due to malnutrition," said Robert Hunt, CEO of Dietitians Australia.

"For a modest investment, we can ensure that older Australians are having their nutrition needs met – and save money in the long term."

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are the skilled professionals to support aged care providers to ensure the daily basic fee increase is put towards serving nutritious meals that are cost effective and meet the needs of the residents in their care.

Despite this, the government has not explicitly adopted the Commission's recommendation to include an APD at every aged care home, and instead is driving funding into a single assessment workforce.

"Food and nutrition was one of four key concerns identified by the Royal Commission that required immediate attention. Dietitians are essential in supporting aged care providers to improve the food our older Australians receive and they ensure it meets the individual nutritional needs of each resident," said Robert.

Funding for the future of telehealth, access to allied health professionals via Medicare and support to implement long-term preventive health measures were also alarmingly absent.

Telehealth has revolutionised healthcare in Australia, yet yesterday's budget only outlined funding until the end of 2021. With the effects of COVID-19 projected to last well beyond this deadline, failing to plan for the future of telehealth is a missed opportunity.

"Telehealth for dietetic services has been in place for over 12 months and has been successful and essential in allowing all Australians to access and maintain nutrition support," said Robert.

"While we welcome the extension of telehealth to December 2021 and the indication of a permanent plan being developed, the lack of funding for this vital service is concerning."

Allied health was also left out of the budget. The current Medicare Benefits Scheme (MBS) which supports Australians to seek allied health support from chronic health conditions remains at 5 subsidised appointments.

Shared between 13 allied health practitioners, the number of appointments are at an inappropriate level to adequately treat complex chronic conditions.

"We've been calling for the MBS to be extended to at least 10 subsidized appointments, to provide greater opportunity for a person to see their dietitian and maintain a long-term change to their health," said Robert.

"Seeing a dietitian early and often can help to prevent chronic conditions from causing irreversible damage and additional complications from occurring.

"The limited support currently available is a disservice to Australians and this is evident as our rates of chronic disease continue to rise," said Robert.

The inadequate funding for preventive health initiatives was disappointing after the development of a promising draft National Preventive Health Strategy.

"Support to increase affordability and access of healthy food along with better food literacy is vital to allow Australians to look after their wellbeing," Robert said.

"It's a shame there isn't greater funding to support this. Preventive health is a win-win – for both the health of Australians and the economy – and reduces the costs of healthcare in the long term."

Having seen an increase in Australians seeking dietetic services for eating disorders, Dietitians Australia is pleased to see the $26.9 million spend to support people with eating disorders and their families.

Funding has been expanded for mental health prevention and treatment, key areas where APDs can support.

“There is a strong connection between food and mood, and the inclusion of dietitians as a key healthcare provider in mental health is vital to ensure Australians can access the care they need,” said Robert.

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Media enquiries

For media enquiries and interviews, contact our Media Officer on 0409 661 920.

Note to editors: Dietitians Australia is the leading voice of nutrition in Australia, representing dietitians nationally and advocating for healthier communities. Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) is the only national credential recognised by the Australian Government as the quality standard for nutrition and dietetics services in Australia.