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Continuing telehealth is essential to keep Australians connected to healthcare

During this time of prolonged uncertainty triggered by the global pandemic, telehealth is the lifeline keeping Australians connected to their dietitian. But without government action, this support will soon be cut short, with current telehealth arrangements due to expire at the end of the month.

An overwhelming majority of Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) working in private practice have highlighted the important role telehealth has in supporting their regular patients. In a recent survey conducted by Dietitians Australia, 97% of private practice APDs found the introduction of telehealth rebates for Medicare, Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and private health patients due to COVID-19, continues to be integral to the provision of nutrition care.

Dietitians Australia is calling on the Federal Government to convert temporary Medicare and DVA telehealth items for dietitians to a permanent feature of healthcare in Australia. Since its introduction in March, Australians have accessed Medicare telehealth allied health services more than 150,000 times¹.

APDs have indicated telehealth has lessened barriers for their patients to access healthcare by eliminating travel costs and time spent in transit. Reduced stress from no longer needing to attend an in-person appointment has also been welcomed by many patients, particularly those who are time poor, find it difficult to travel or are full-time carers.

"For a range of conditions, telehealth is both as [clinically effective and cost efficient](#)² as in-person services. Being able to access their dietitian via telehealth has allowed Australians to continue their regular appointments, where it otherwise might have been disrupted," said Robert Hunt, CEO of Dietitians Australia.

"Some private health funds have already extended telehealth access for their customers. To ensure equal access for all Australians, we now look to the government to continue to allow telehealth appointments as an option for allied health care."

APDs have reported that telehealth has been of benefit to many of their patient groups including:

- Reducing the potential health impacts from travelling to an appointment for clients with health conditions such as chronic fatigue, mental health conditions, mobility issues, NDIS participants and people who are immune compromised.
- Eliminating travel time for all clients, regardless of location, and travel costs (e.g. public transport, fuel/parking, taxi) which is particularly beneficial for clients with low income.
- Expanding health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Increasing ease of access for those who are unable to or find it difficult to travel (e.g. clients in lockdown, border town residents, fly-in-fly-out workers, parents and carers)

"Telehealth also enables clients to easily show their dietitian foods from their pantry, fridge as well as their cooking space, and some clients prefer being able to provide this visual explanation of their food and living situation," said Hunt.

On Friday 18 September 2020, dietitians across Australia will celebrate Dietitians Day, which marks 90 years of dietetics in Australia. The focus of this day is how 'dietitians make a difference' in building healthier communities.

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Note to Editors: Dietitians Australia (DA) 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. For more information, including DA's media releases and position on topical nutrition issues, visit www.dietitiansaustralia.org.au.

“We’ve seen a lot of progression over the past 90 years, as the profession has advanced with science and technology. Telehealth is a great example of how we can continue to help make a difference in the lives of Australians, by providing the option for everyone to access high-quality nutrition care,” said Hunt.

“Delivery of healthcare has progressed dramatically in the past 6 months. It would be a terrible disservice for all Australians if the government reduced the ways Australians can see their health practitioner.”

The call for continuing telehealth has been backed by the Select Committee on Financial Technology and Regulatory Technology in a recent interim report, and supported by leading medical bodies such as the Australian Medical Association and Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.

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References:

¹Snoswell, C.L., Caffery, L.J., Hobson, G., Taylor, M.L., Haydon, H.M., Thomas, E., Smith, A.C. Centre for Online Health, The University of Queensland. Telehealth and coronavirus: Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) activity in Australia. <https://coh.centre.uq.edu.au/telehealth-and-coronavirus-medicare-benefits-schedule-mbs-activity-australia> . Published May 19, 2020. Accessed 14 September 2020

²Kelly, JT, Allman-Farinelli, M, Chen, J, et al. Dietitians Australia position statement on telehealth. Nutr Diet. 2020; 1– 10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1747-0080.12619>