



THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS

## **Access to general practice services for people resident in Australia**

**Aim: To describe the RACGP position with respect to ensuring universal access to general practice services for people resident in Australia.**

### Our Position Statement

The importance of a robust, accessible primary care sector, generally

- There is compelling evidence of the importance of a robust, accessible primary care sector in ensuring the health of the nation. Good primary care experience, especially good access and continuity of care is associated with better self-reported health, and is able to reduce the adverse association of income inequality with general health.<sup>1</sup>
- Equity of access to general practice is necessary to ensuring equity of health outcome within the Australian community.
- The stronger the primary care infrastructure, the lower the overall costs of health services.<sup>2</sup> Poor access to primary care results in increased costs in other areas of the health system, or the use of more expensive services, and increased costs to members of the community.
- All Australians should have access to high quality general practice and primary health care, as part of their access to health care more generally.
- Universal access is an important element of the social fabric of Australia. It ensures inclusion of all Australians, and thus is important beyond its immediate role in supporting the health of the nation.
- Universal access to general practice and primary care in Australia should extend to refugees and people seeking asylum.

### **The essential building blocks of high quality general practice**

- There are a number of essential building blocks of high quality general practice, including the technical competence of the general practitioners, the quality of the interpersonal relationships between the people involved, and the quality of the amenities needed to provide the care.
- GPs, generally, pursue their profession with diligence, and continuously work to maintain their competence in the broad range of areas needed to provide the community with services. The community also seeks this outcome.

- The relationship between GP and patient is an essential building block, and clinical independence and professional integrity must be safeguarded.<sup>3</sup>
- Within the GP-patient partnership, both the doctor and the patient have rights as well as responsibilities. For the GP, this includes placing an appropriate value on the services when determining any fee, considering the time, skill, and experience involved in the performance of those services together with any special circumstances, ensuring that the patient is aware of the fees and encouraging open discussion of health care costs.<sup>4</sup>
- High quality general practice care needs to be recognised and rewarded appropriately.
- The real costs of providing high quality general practice need to be met, despite the fact that there are some individuals and communities who have less ability to pay for health services.

### **The essential elements of accessible primary care**

- Enough GPs must be trained in Australia to meet the needs of the Australian community.
- Enough GPs must be retained in the workforce to meet the needs of the Australian community. The supply of primary care doctors has been shown to have a positive association with the population's health.<sup>5</sup>
- Practice nurses, practice managers and other practice staff are valuable resources that allow GPs to provide care effectively and efficiently. There must be sufficient non-GP staff available in general practices to ensure that the time a GP spends with their patient is not compromised.
- GPs are entitled to an income consistent with the level of skill, training, responsibility and commitment required to undertake and maintain a career in general practice. The professional requirements for a career in general practice are equal to those in other medical specialties. Attracting and retaining talented people as GPs requires that pursuing this career path should not be a financial disadvantage.
- The provision of quality care must be supported by appropriate infrastructure, such as telecommunications, information technology, clinical technologies (such as those used in pathology and other diagnostics) and other facilities. The cost of this infrastructure is an essential overhead in the provision of safe, high quality general practice.
- The Government must support the application of suitable technologies that are needed by GPs to provide the quality of care expected by their patients.

### **The obligations of the RACGP**

- The RACGP must continue to ensure that the quality of care provided by Australian general practitioners is the highest possible. It continues to do this by maintaining its national leadership in setting and maintaining the standards for quality clinical practice, education and research in Australian general practice.
- The RACGP must continue its role as advocate for the Australian community, particularly people who are disadvantaged.

- The RACGP needs to inform the Australian public and governments about the real costs (both tangible and intangible) of providing safe, high quality care to the Australian public. Apart from the direct costs of sustaining high quality personnel, and facilities, these include the burden of red tape, and the intangible costs created when the system discourages GPs and results in loss of experienced GPs from the workforce.
- The RACGP will continue to inform the Australian community and governments by providing information and evidence about the best strategies to ensure universal access to high quality general practice care. It will also provide information about the sorts of mechanisms for remunerating GPs that most strongly support the provision of excellent care, the size of the general practice workforce that is needed, and the type of infrastructure that general practice requires.

### **Governments' contributions**

- Successive Australian governments have formed a 'social contract' with the Australian community. In this 'social contract' the government committed to provide universal access to high quality health care.
- It is the responsibility of governments to ensure this level of access to high standards of health care for all members of the community.
- The size of the government's contribution to health care is a matter for agreement between the electorate and governments.
- Any changes to the way in which governments support each Australian in getting access to health care (such as the level of the government's subsidy to individual Australians) is, principally, a matter for the community and the governments.
- GPs who continue or commence providing care for individuals who have a limited ability to pay for their services, or practicing in areas of lower socio-economic status, must be supported by arrangements that ensure they are not financially disadvantaged by that choice.
- Any payment system must be simple, as the administrative and compliance burden of complex payment systems reduce the capacity to provide patient care, and even sophisticated mechanisms for paying doctors reduce, but do not eliminate perverse incentives and undesirable outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

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