

10 February 2022

Mr Daniel McCabe
First Assistant Secretary
Benefits, Integrity and Digital Health
Department of Health
ACT 2601

Cc: Minister for Health

Dear Mr McCabe

I am writing to seek changes to the telehealth existing relationship rule that will allow immunocompromised general practitioners (GPs) and those that are in isolation (because they have tested positive for COVID-19 or furloughing due to exposure to a confirmed case) to safely continue care for their patients.

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) is Australia's largest professional general practice organisation, representing more than 43,000 members working in or towards a career in general practice, including 10,000 GPs in rural and remote Australia.

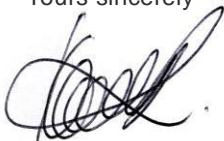
We have consistently raised the issue of immunocompromised GPs, and GPs caring for immunocompromised family members, being unable to see patients face-to-face due to the increased risk COVID-19 presents. The risk to these GPs and their family members is now higher than ever before, due to the rapidly increasing number of COVID-19 cases in Australia. While the number of immunocompromised GPs or those caring for immunocompromised family is low, the current demand for general practice care is unprecedented – requiring flexibility of rules that were established at a time when the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was unknown.

The existing relationship requirement for a face-to-face consultation within the last 12 months for telehealth to attract a Medicare rebate is not always pragmatic for immunocompromised GPs or GPs in isolation. While GPs furloughing can see patients via telehealth, the strict application of the 12-month rule means that they are often precluded from seeing some patients via telehealth, despite the fact the patient is known to the GP and the practice.

The high demand for general practice care and the high likelihood of exposure are impacting the capacity of the general practice workforce. An exemption from the existing relationship rule for immunocompromised GPs and GPs in isolation for patients known to the practice (e.g. patient who have been to the practice within the last 24 months) would increase workforce capacity at this critical time.

The RACGP is calling on the Department of Health to make changes to the telehealth existing relationship rule that will allow immunocompromised general practitioners (GPs) and those that are in isolation (because they have tested positive for COVID-19 or furloughing due to exposure to a confirmed case) to safely continue care for their patients.

Yours sincerely



Dr Karen Price
President