

Key Policy in discussion

Health

Portfolio and or agency

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND AGED CARE

Date Issued

20 May 2023

Key Portfolio Issues

Health was a major focus of the 2023-24 Budget.

The Australian Government will invest \$5.7 billion over 5 years to enhance healthcare accessibility and affordability. This includes tripling bulk billing incentives for consultations with general practitioners for low-income patients and children, expanding the workforce incentive program to employ more nurses and allied health professionals in general practices, and improving access to primary care after hours for homeless individuals and multicultural communities.

Women will benefit from the increased bulk billing incentives as they are more likely to be receipt of Government assistance and to be responsible for the health care of children, however NFAW is concerned that the new incentives will undermine the universality of Medicare and ultimately undermine the health and wellbeing of Australian women.

Australian women are more likely to experience poor mental health than men, with young women aged 20-25 experiencing the highest levels and the Budget failed to substantially increase funding for mental health. Since the 2020 Productivity Commission Report called for a \$2.4 billion annual increase in services, only around \$500 million additional funding per year has been provided by the Commonwealth.

Budget Measures

The Australian Government will invest \$5.7 billion over 5 years to enhance healthcare accessibility and affordability. This includes tripling bulk billing incentives for consultations with general practitioners for low-income patients and children, expanding the workforce incentive program to employ more nurses and allied health professionals in general practices, and improving access to primary care after hours for homeless individuals and multicultural communities.

Strengthening Medicare

Payments (\$m)

	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
Services Australia	0.5	78.5	40.2	22.2	22.1
Department of Health and Aged Care	0.2	988.9	1,265.4	1,162.2	1,182.7
Australian Digital Health Agency	-	320.0	341.1	124.9	125.2
Department of Veterans' Affairs	-	7.1	10.2	9.7	9.4
Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation	-	4.6	4.7	-	-
Office of the Australian Information Commissioner	-	2.4	2.4	-	-
National Disability Insurance Agency	-	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1
Department of Social Services	-	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
Total – Payments	0.7	1,402.8	1,665.4	1,320.5	1,340.9
<i>Related receipts (\$m)</i>					
<i>Australian Digital Health Agency</i>	-	32.3	32.3	32.3	32.3

Source: [2023-24 Budget Paper No. 2](#), p. 147

Additionally, funding is allocated to connect frequent hospital users to comprehensive care in the community, commission allied health services for underserved communities, and support women's health through subsidized wound consumables, midwifery scholarships, and enhancements to nurse practitioner roles. The initiative also focuses on digitising health services, improving digital health infrastructure, and investing in training and workforce incentives to enhance the medical and health workforce. The measure is supported by existing resources within the Department of Health and Aged Care and reprioritized funding from other health programs.

Mental Health

Payments (\$m)

	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
National Mental Health Commission	-	-	-	-	-
Department of Health and Aged Care	-1.3	160.8	93.9	-79.7	-84.8
Total – Payments	-1.3	160.8	93.9	-79.7	-84.8

Source: [2023-24 Budget Paper No. 2](#), p. 139

The National Foundation for Australian Women is a feminist organisation, independent of party politics and working in partnership with other women's organisations. NFAW is dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of Australian women, including intellectual, cultural, political, social, economic, legal, industrial and domestic spheres.

The Australian Government has allocated \$88.9 million in new funding over 5 years to strengthen the country's mental health and suicide prevention system. However, only part of this funding is new. The funding includes various initiatives such as extending psychosocial supports for individuals with severe mental illness, supporting survivors of torture and trauma, increasing psychology placements, enhancing mental health capabilities of the healthcare workforce, and providing continued support for postvention services and digital mental health services. The government plans to partially offset these costs by redirecting funding from other mental health programs and utilizing existing resources within the Department of Health and Aged Care and the National Mental Health Commission.

Improving Health Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Payments (\$m)

	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
Department of Health and Aged Care	-	45.7	85.7	74.2	85.5
Cancer Australia	-	2.2	11.5	12.7	12.2
Total – Payments	-	47.9	97.2	86.9	97.7

Source: 2023-24 Budget Paper No. 2, p. 139

The Australian Government has allocated \$363.1 million over four years to address health and aged care disparities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The funding includes initiatives to improve cancer outcomes, enhance aged care services, provide dialysis units, promote health assessments, support mental health treatment plans, raise awareness of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students. Partial funding has been allocated, and the measure extends the Strengthening First Nations Health initiative from the 2022-23 October Budget.

Preventive Health Reform

Payments (\$m)

	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
Department of Health and Aged Care	-	23.1	13.9	9.6	4.2

Source: 2023-34 Budget Paper No. 2, p. 143

The Australian Government has allocated \$53.4 million over five years for various health initiatives, including research and data collection for women and girls' health, support for Men's Sheds and men's health research, ongoing studies on disease burden and preventive health strategies, research on chronic conditions, implementation of food-related databases and rating systems, and changes to the Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease scheme. The funding will be

The National Foundation for Australian Women is a feminist organisation, independent of party politics and working in partnership with other women's organisations. NFAW is dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of Australian women, including intellectual, cultural, political, social, economic, legal, industrial and domestic spheres.

partially covered by existing resources within the Department of Health and Aged Care and redirected funds from the "Reinvesting in Health and Aged Care Programs" budget measure.

Reducing Harm Caused by Alcohol and Other Drugs in Australia

Payments (\$m)

	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
Department of Health and Aged Care	-	19.4	13.7	-	-

Source: 2023-24 Budget Paper No. 2, p. 144

The Australian Government will allocate \$33.6 million over two years to enhance community-based alcohol and drug programs, aiming to improve health outcomes. The funding includes support for treatment services, the Good Sports program for community sports clubs, culturally appropriate treatment services for First Nations women, online services for problematic alcohol use, a national online directory for support services, and a free addiction support program. The measure will be partially funded through existing resources within the Department of Health and Aged Care and by redirecting funds from the "Reinvesting in Health and Aged Care Programs" budget measure.

Support for Children and New and Expecting Parents

Payments (\$m)

	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
Department of Health and Aged Care	-	7.6	10.8	-	-

Source: 2023-24 Budget Paper No. 2, p. 151

The Australian Government will allocate \$19.7 million over two years to support parents in promoting their children's health and early development. The funding includes expanding the delivery of donor milk, continuing support for the National Breastfeeding Helpline, funding for Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder prevention, and sustaining activities addressing childhood immunization rates. The measure will be partially funded through the existing resources of the Department of Health and Aged Care and by redirecting funds from the "Reinvesting in Health and Aged Care Programs" budget measure.

Background: current circumstances of women in this portfolio

While women in Australia have relatively good health, gender-based disparities exist in areas such as reproductive health, mental health, and chronic diseases.

Women often experience difficulties accessing contraception, reproductive health services, and abortion due to limited availability in certain regions and cultural stigmatization. Mental health

The National Foundation for Australian Women is a feminist organisation, independent of party politics and working in partnership with other women's organisations. NFAW is dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of Australian women, including intellectual, cultural, political, social, economic, legal, industrial and domestic spheres.

concerns, including postnatal depression and anxiety, are prevalent among women, and access to adequate mental health support can be limited. Additionally, chronic diseases such as heart disease, osteoporosis, and autoimmune disorders disproportionately affect women, and there may be gaps in specialized care and research specific to women's health needs.

In Australia in 2021-22, females were more likely to visit a general practitioner (GP) than males, with 92 per cent of females seeking medical care compared to 87 per cent of males. Additionally, females received a higher number of Medicare-subsidized GP services per person, averaging 8.3 services, while males averaged 6.3 services. As a result the Medicare freeze under the previous Coalition Government disproportionately impacted women.

Women are also more likely to work in the health sector, with around 2.4 times the number of women than men working on an FTE basis. Additional funding for primary health care will benefit female GPs and other primary health care workers, providing additional support and reducing risk of burnout.

In terms of mental health, a greater percentage of females (45 per cent) reported lifetime experience of a mental disorder compared to males (43 per cent). Furthermore, in the previous 12 months a higher proportion of females (25 per cent) experienced symptoms of a mental disorder compared to males (18 per cent).

Women are more likely to rely on Government payments with 58 per cent of benefit recipients female, reflecting women's lower levels of financial security and income.

In terms of chronic conditions, 49.0 per cent of women had at least one, with one in five experiencing two or more conditions. Similarly, 43.9 per cent of males had at least one chronic condition, and 16.4 per cent had two or more.

Women continue to be susceptible to the adverse effects of both their partner's substance use and their own substance use. Gender serves as a key factor in how individuals are perceived and judged regarding their alcohol and drug consumption. As a result, women, in particular, encounter substantial stigma when they engage in drug use. Although men historically exhibited higher levels of drug use, recent data suggests that this trend might be shifting.

Gender implications of this budget measure

Women will benefit from the increased bulk billing incentives as they are more likely to be in receipt of Government assistance and be responsible for the health care of children, however NFAW is concerned that the new incentives will undermine the universality of Medicare and ultimately undermine the health and wellbeing of Australian women. Universal health care ensures that women have equitable access to comprehensive, affordable, and gender-sensitive healthcare services, promoting their health, well-being, and empowerment.

The National Foundation for Australian Women is a feminist organisation, independent of party politics and working in partnership with other women's organisations. NFAW is dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of Australian women, including intellectual, cultural, political, social, economic, legal, industrial and domestic spheres.

The increase of Mental Health funding of \$89.8 million over four years means that the Commonwealth continues to underinvest in this important area of healthcare. In 2020 the Productivity Commission recommended \$2.4 billion in additional funding for mental health, and to date the Commonwealth has only invested around an additional \$500 million per year. With poor mental health impacting more women than men, this disproportionately impacts women and particularly young women.

Given the women are more likely to have chronic health conditions, additional funding for preventative health should prevent more women developing these conditions that can increase rates of premature death and poor health. However, the scale of the investments fall way short of international benchmarks with Australia spending 85 per cent less on preventative and community health than Canada.

Women will benefit from the additional funding and focus of spending on alcohol and drug harm, however ongoing funding and broader reforms are needed to improve health outcomes and safety for women. Likewise, women and their children will benefit from the increased focus and support for new and expecting parents. However, the lapsing nature of these funds will undermine potential benefits.

Recommendations

The Government should maintain its commitment to universal Medicare, and increase rebates for all GP consults.

NFAW calls on the Government to substantially increase funding for mental health care to address significant unmet need for services that disproportionately impacts women.

The Government should substantially and permanently increase funding for preventative health care.

The Government should continue its investments in minimising harm from alcohol and drugs and services for new and expecting parents beyond the current two years of funding committed.