

Budget 2020 – Health

Health

The 2020-21 Budget included additional short-term funding of Medicare items for mental health services which will benefit women who are greater users of mental health services. However, there remain significant out of pocket costs associated with mental health services that this Budget has not addressed, which disproportionately impact women due to higher usage.

There was no additional funding included in the Budget to implement the 2020-30 Women’s Health Strategy which was released in April 2019. This represents a missed opportunity for the Government to drive improvements in women’s health based on the Strategy.

There was also limited additional funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health despite the new Closing the Gap targets announced in July 2020.

Mental Health

The Budget

In recognition of the mental health implications of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns the 2020 Budget included a number of measures across portfolios which increase funding for mental health services.

Payments (\$m)

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
COVID-19 Response Package — additional mental health and crisis support for Victoria		46.1	1.2	-	
COVID-19 Response Package — supporting mental health		43.9	54.8	1.8	
COVID-19 Response Package – BusinessBalance – supporting the mental health of Australians in small business		7.0			
Prioritising Mental Health — continued support		12.6	13.3	13.4	13.6
Mental Health Support for Veterans and their Families		12.9	28.4	29.7	30.7

Source: 2020-21 Budget Paper No. 2, Pages 93, 96, 103, 114, 168.

The Government will provide an additional \$47.3 million over two years for crisis support services for people experiencing mental illness and distress as a result of COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria including additional funding to establish 15 enhanced mental health clinics; funding for Beyond Blue, Lifeline, Kids Helpline and Headspace. There is also additional funding specifically to address vulnerable populations including culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

As part of the COVID-19 response, the Government is also providing an additional \$100.8 million over two years to provide up to 10 additional psychological therapy sessions each calendar year. The COVID-19 Response package also includes \$7 million in 2020-21 to support the mental health and financial well-being of small businesses impacted by COVID-19.

In order to address issues regarding the mental health of veterans the Government will provide \$101.7 million over four years including an increase in the fees paid to providers and increase in the digital mental health capabilities.

In addition, the Government will invest \$62.1 million over four years to improve access to mental health services including through an expansion to the Individual Placement and Support Programme under the Youth Employment Strategy which assists vulnerable young people with mental illness participate in the workforce.

Gender implications

Women are more likely to report experiencing mental distress than men and also are more likely to receive mental health services (AIHW, 2018): 12.6% of Australian females accessed Medicare-subsidised mental health-specific services compared to 8.5% of Australian males in 2018–19 (ibid).

The mental health impacts of COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns have been well documented, with women more likely to have reported a decline (ABS, 2020). Research also shows that economic downturns negatively impact mental health, with a larger impact on young women than other cohorts (Jackson, Black and Johnson, 2020).

The time-limited expansion of services that individuals with a mental health plan can access under Medicare from 10 to 20 per year does not address the high out of pocket costs for these services. These costs reduce access to these services, exacerbating existing mental health inequities and disproportionately impact women due to their higher use of services.

In addition, the efficacy of tele-health for mental health is well established and should continue to be funded post-COVID 19 (Totten AM, Womack DM, Eden KB, et al, 2016).

Medicare

The Budget

One of the most transformational aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the increase in access to tele-health services, and the Budget included a further \$111.6 million (2020-21 Budget Paper No. 2, Page 96) for extension of temporary services.

Gender implications

Women are bigger users of Medicare services than men (Department of Health,2019), and access to tele-health services is particularly important in facilitating the access of women to gender specific health care – particularly women in regional and remote Australia. Continuation of access to tele-health services should be a priority in the 2021-22 Budget.

Hospitals

The Budget

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed significant additional pressure on the hospital system, and the Budget includes further investments to ensure the sector has adequate resources to meet demand.

Payments (\$m)

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
COVID-19 Response Package — supporting our hospitals — continuation		1,103.1		-	

Source: 2020-21 Budget Paper No. 2, p. 97.

The Australian Government will provide a further \$1.1 billion in 2020-21 for the COVID-19 response for Public and Private Hospitals to meet the surge in demand and higher costs of services due to COVID-19.

Gender implications

Women were 8% more likely to use both public and private hospital services in 2018-19 (AIHW, 2020a) and so will disproportionately benefit from this increase in funding, however there remains an ongoing need for an increase in funding for hospital services in Australia to ensure equitable access.

Medicines

The Budget

The 2020-21 Budget included funding for new medicines and to establish a unique identification system for tracking of medical devices.

Payments (\$m)

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Improving Access to Medicines — unique device identification system for medical devices in Australia		1.7	2.5	2.6	1.0
Improving Access to Medicines — Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and Repatriation Pharmaceutical Benefits		78.6	86.8	95.6	99.8

Scheme — new and amended listings.

Source: 2020-21 Budget Paper No. 2, pp. 100, 101.

The 2020-21 Budget includes \$375.5 million of funding for medicines recommended by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Council, ensuring ongoing access to new medicines for Australians. The new medicines funded include Lynparza for the treatment of Ovarian cancer which currently costs more than \$140,000 per course.

In addition, the Budget includes \$7.7 million over four years to establish a unique identification system for implanted medical devices, which will enable timely clinical and regulatory action if issues arise.

Gender implications

1,532 Australian women are diagnosed with Ovarian cancer every year, and the survival rates are only 46% (AIHW, Cancer data in Australia, 2020b). The decision to fund Lynparza will benefit an additional 300 women per year (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2020).

It has been estimated that up to 175,000 Australian women had transvaginal mesh procedures performed between 1998 and the discontinuation of their use in Australia due to significant adverse events (The Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Number of women in Australia who have had transvaginal mesh implants and related matters, 2018). A number of inquiries and court cases highlighted that there were major deficiencies in record keeping on the use of medical devices in Australia, making recalls difficult in the event of subsequent adverse events occurring. While the Government initiative to provide \$7.7 million over four years to establish a unique identification system for implanted medical devices will not assist women impacted by the transvaginal mesh failures, it will ensure that the lessons are learned and limit the harm from future failures.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health

The Budget

In July the Australian Government announced a new set of Closing the Gap targets, and a number of minor funding announcements were included in the Budget for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (Prime Minister and Minister for Indigenous Australians, Media Release – National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020).

Importantly there was some indication that the Government will build on the success of community controlled organisations in the COVID-19 response, and strengthen these to help meet the targets in years ahead. This included allocation of \$46.5 million over four years from existing resources to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations build their capacity and business models for the next phase of Closing the Gap.

In addition, the Budget provided \$21.2 million over four years from 2020-21 (and \$0.1 million in 2024-25) to support delivery of a number of initiatives under the Roadmap for Hearing Health. This measure included initiatives to improve access to hearing services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

As part of the prioritising mental health and preventative health funding, the Government will provide \$4.6 million to the Raise Foundation, ReachOut, the Harrison Riedel Foundation and Stand Tall to deliver suicide prevention, peer support and mentoring services for young people, including the development of culturally safe prevention and early intervention services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Sport

The Budget

Building an Active Australia — FIFA Women’s World Cup 2023

Expense (\$m)

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Department of Health		2.4	nfp	nfp	nfp

Source: 2020-21 Budget Paper No. 2, Page 92.

The FIFA Women’s World Cup 2023 will provide an important boost to participation by girls and women in the sport.

Gender implications

While women report higher levels of participation in recreational sport than men, women from non-English speaking backgrounds have lower levels of participation than other (Clearing House for Sport, 2020). Such activity is important in promoting overall wellbeing and health, and initiatives that can boost participation should be leveraged. The FIFA Women’s World Cup 2023 presents such an opportunity.

Recommendations

1. NFAW calls on the Government to provide further funding for the implementation of the 2020-2030 Women’s Health Strategy in the 2021-22 Budget, to ensure that it drives improvements in the health of Australia women.
2. NFAW supports ongoing provision of Medicare tele-health services after COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure ongoing equitable access to health, mental health and reproductive health services.

3. The ongoing high out of pocket costs for mental health are of concern, and the NFAW notes that given the higher use of these services it is disproportionately impacting women.
4. Meeting the Closing the Gap targets will require additional investments in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs, and the NFAW calls on these to be funded in the 2021-22 Budget.

References

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