



Australian Health Care Reform Alliance

AHCRA Background briefing – Primary health care

What is primary health care?

Primary health care is a complex term that incorporates both a practical and a philosophical approach to health care and prevention.

In practical terms, it refers to community-based health and medical services that are accessed directly by consumers and the community (as opposed to those where a referral by another health care provider is necessary). This includes both care provided to individuals and population-wide services such as health promotion and preventive health care. Typically, the term primary health care incorporates a wide range of health services, including medical, nursing and allied health, reflects a multi-disciplinary approach to care provision, and necessarily involves collaboration with other sector services such as education and social support to achieve its goals.

It is not the same as 'primary care' which is a narrower term referring specifically to health and medical care provided in the community, typically by a general medical practitioner (general practitioner, primary care or family physician).

In philosophical terms, primary health care uses the social model of health which sees health as maximising well-being rather than just an absence of disease. It reflects an understanding that health is determined by a broad range of factors other than access to medical care. These include social determinants such as economic, cultural and social status. The primary health care approach also generally incorporates a commitment to health equity, community empowerment and social justice.

Why is primary health care important?

Primary health care is important because it is consumers' most frequently used health care. The primary health care sector is where the great majority of health issues are identified and addressed. It is also important as it tries to reflect a person-family centred, holistic approach, which is oriented to wellness and building people's capacity to care for themselves (as opposed to services focussed on the provision of individual services aimed at curing illnesses in isolation from their broader social and environmental context).

There is good evidence that a health system that is oriented towards primary health care is more cost-effective, results in better health outcomes and higher consumer satisfaction than one oriented towards hospital or specialist care. A health system focussed on primary health care also tends to be more equitable in terms of both the allocation of health care resources and health outcomes for the population.

International comparisons have found that countries that orient their health system around primary care have lower infant mortality, lower suicide rates, higher average life expectancies and greater consumer satisfaction than those whose health system is oriented around specialist care.

What is the current health reform agenda's approach to primary health care?

The Government's reform agenda in primary health care focuses mainly on the provision of services to individual consumers and thus reflect an approach more in line with primary care than primary health care. In fact, they explicitly exclude any mention of the social determinants of health.

AHCRA believes that there is potential in many of the recommended reforms in the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission's Report, in particular in supporting the delivery of more coordinated and multidisciplinary care, improving health equity and a greater focus on increasing consumer involvement and. However, many of these proposals have not been outlined in detail and are yet to be realised within the reform process. In addition, systemic barriers to access (especially financial barriers but also geographical, cultural, and physical) have not received sufficient attention. The roles described for Medicare Locals though (if given the right policy and funding levers) do have the potential to build on what some of the leading Divisions of General Practice have already achieved in this regard.

What does AHCRA want?

In the implementation of the health reform agenda, the Government has thus far focussed mainly on the hospital sector. While hospitals are an important part of health care, AHCRA believes that the greatest benefits from reform will come from making changes to the way in which we approach primary health care and prevention.

AHCRA strongly advocates for an increased focus on primary health care within the reform agenda, including specific and detailed commitment to the following:

- a focus on increasing equity in health care for all groups, most urgently an explicit commitment to increasing access to care for disadvantaged groups, in particular Indigenous Australians
- recognition of the need to address the social determinants of health in order to increase overall health and wellbeing and improve health equity
- a plan for increasing and supporting consumer involvement in all facets of health care, including policy making, program development and health service evaluation.

Key facts

Countries with stronger primary health care systems spend less on health care and achieve better outcomes than those with weaker primary health care systems.

Over 8.5% of hospitalisations in Australia every year are preventable if timely and effective non-hospital care had been provided in the community.

Primary health care reform needs to move beyond narrow issues of access to care to address the social determinants of health in order to deliver significant health gains for the whole community.

References

[Building a 21st Century Primary Health Care System](#) The Australian Government 2010

[Primary Health Care Reform in Australia](#). The Australian Government 2010

[Now more than ever – the World Health Report 2008](#) World Health Organisation 2008

What is AHCRA?

The Australian Health Care Reform Alliance (AHCRA) is a coalition of over 40 organisations representing consumers and health care providers advocating for a fairer and more effective health care system.

More information about AHCRA can be found at www.healthreform.org.au