



Australian Health Care Reform Alliance

C/- PO Box 280 Deakin West ACT 2600 ABN 64 051 645 674
www.healthreform.org.au

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Medicare Locals off to good start but need stronger government vision and support

The first set of new Medicare Locals has made an encouraging start in their journey to improve primary health care throughout Australia. However, they still need stronger government support and more levers to drive change, and to start planning more directly to reduce inequities and increase prevention. These are the conclusions of a new research report from the Australian Health Care Reform Alliance today.

“It was very early days when we did the interviews but clearly Medicare Locals were busy establishing strong foundations with great enthusiasm, building on the work of their predecessor Divisions of General Practice, planning and initiating new service improvements, and with some starting to undertake comprehensive population health plans,” said Tony McBride, Chair of AHCRA.

“Medicare Locals are now the only government-funded organisations with the brief to actively involve practitioners and communities in improving our whole primary health care system,” said Mr McBride. “The current health system has high quality health professionals but many are on separate islands, so the consumer has to row the long distances between them with poor maps. Consumers know only too well how frustrating it can be to find, afford and link together the team of health professionals they need to stay healthy or manage their chronic conditions. A key Medicare Local role is to build an integrated and accessible primary health care system so that the consumer is not left to navigate their own way through it. So we are pleased that the Medicare Locals interviewed are getting on with creating smooth and well-guided pathways in partnership with local GPs, allied health practitioners and consumers.”

The new Medicare Locals are facing major hurdles however. The report shows that many expressed concerns that they had too little control over factors influencing some of their key goals, such as promoting efficiency and reducing inequity. Other barriers to their successful implementation included a lack of overall funding and deep uncertainty and concern about the longer term political and policy environment.

“AHCRA is calling on both the Government and the Opposition to support MLs over the long-term” said Mr McBride. “It’s not a job that can be done overnight or even in one electoral cycle. Governments need to give them the right tools to do their job (certainty, funding levers and policy clarity about addressing inequity, increase prevention and integrating the system). And Medicare Locals need to respond more directly to these priorities.”

The report is titled *Medicare Locals: the first six and next twelve months* available at www.healthreform.org.au

** AHCRA advocates for a fairer health system. It is a coalition of over 30 national and state peak health groups, including those representing the medical profession, nursing, allied health, the rural health sector, as well as consumer groups.*

Tony McBride is available for interview on mobile 0407 531 468