GENERAL PRACTICE NZ

COVID-19 Care in the Community funding changes from February 2023
Key messages

- We recognise the need to transition COVID-19 care from a pandemic response to managing it as 'business as usual' alongside other health conditions. Return to BAU is challenging while a Health Order requiring isolation remains in place. It would make sense to review the Order in line with the changed primary care response.

- The changes due to come into effect from February 13 are a pragmatic next step, and seek to continue to target those who have the greatest risk of becoming seriously unwell because of COVID-19 infection with significantly reduced Government funding ($44m for the first half of 2023, about a quarter of spending on COVID Care in the Community in the second half of 2022).

- We applaud the additional funding for pharmacy which has been a vital part of the COVID response.

- However, the impact of the overall reduction in funding will inevitably be felt by general practices and their patients, and indeed the whole health system. COVID funding has been a lifeline for many general practices and the loss of that revenue is likely to have consequences across all services, with particular concerns as we head into the next winter.

- Even though the planned changes will reduce the number of proactive assessments and follow-ups, COVID-19 will continue to be a major workload for general practice, with large cohorts of vulnerable patients needing reviews and support. With reduced funding practices may well struggle to maintain the workforce and level of services that have been available.

- We know that there will be people who are not eligible for funding who will be unable or unwilling to pay the practice co-payment. This can in turn lead to people delaying care and becoming more unwell, or choosing to seek care in Emergency Departments.

- Red streaming and the additional costs associated with COVID-19 related consultations, which generally take longer than a standard consultation, are not factored into capitation funding. Some practices may need to reflect this in the co-payments they charge, and some clinics may not find it possible to maintain streaming without the additional funding.

- We know that the burden of long COVID will put even more pressure on primary care, at a time when funding for chronic conditions is even more stretched with no increase in funding for Care Plus in 2022.

- The Te Whatu Ora COVID-19 response team has been responsive to feedback from the sector in developing the revised framework, and we know they recognise the primary care funding challenges. We hope that the impact of these changes will be closely monitored and steps taken to address any issues that may emerge when they are implemented.

- Overall this reduction in general practice revenue is likely to expose the long-standing issues of primary care underfunding and a general practice funding model that is not fit for purpose. We hope to see urgent progress on long overdue changes to wider funding.

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