

Avant's position on primary care reform

March 2023

Avant believes that a strong and well-supported primary care sector led by general practice will improve health outcomes for all Australians, especially those with complex chronic conditions. To achieve this, Australia's limited health resources need to be allocated wisely. Any new care and funding models must favour improved patient care over cost savings alone. Improving access to care should not compromise quality and safety. More government investment in general practice is needed to reverse workforce trends. Clear medical indemnity arrangements that provide certainty for doctors and patients are essential.

Background

Australia has a safe, high-quality and cost-effective healthcare system by international standards.¹ Most people have access to quality, affordable primary care, with nearly 9 in 10 Australians seeing a general practitioner (GP) each year.² Practitioners and patients alike are supported by an effective medical indemnity system.

However, there is increasing concern about the sustainability of Australia's healthcare system, and in particular primary care. Our ageing population is increasingly living with chronic health conditions and requiring more healthcare services.³ The real value of Medicare rebates continue to decrease while general practice costs have increased, with many practices now charging out-of-pocket fees as it is financially unviable to operate solely on the Medicare rebate. Some patients are reporting difficulty in accessing GPs, particularly without out-of-pocket fees, most notably in rural and remote communities. GPs are also confronting growing regulatory and compliance pressures. Together, these factors are reducing workforce retention and the attractiveness of general practice as a career.

Strengthening primary care is a major priority for the Commonwealth Government, with the foundation for reform provided by the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce report.⁴ The Government has committed \$750 million for high-priority investments in primary care, in line with the Taskforce recommendations, and will bring forward its plan through the 2023-24 Budget.⁵

Avant's position

Avant believes that a strong and well-supported primary care sector led by general practice will improve health outcomes for all Australians, especially for those with complex chronic conditions.

A strong and sustainable primary care system:

- is multidisciplinary, team-based, GP-led, collaborative and patient-centred, involving all participants in the system
- encourages continuity of care and effective patient follow-up
- effectively engages patients in their own healthcare
- prioritises appropriate affordable access for all, regardless of background, ability and socioeconomic status
- supports general practice in providing accessible and quality acute care services to relieve pressure on hospital emergency departments
- measures and shares health outcomes to permit data-driven continuous improvement and education
- incorporates and integrates technology that allows secure and timely communication between care providers and with patients
- appropriately funds a sustainable workforce delivering safe, high-quality care
- enables practitioner health and wellbeing, workforce satisfaction and productivity
- has clear medical indemnity arrangements that provide certainty for doctors and patients alike.

Avant welcomes the work of the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce and broadly supports the four themes and supporting recommendations of its February 2023 report. Our position on each of the themes and response on specific recommendations follows.

1. Increasing access to primary care

It is our strong view that improving access to primary care should not compromise quality and safety. Meeting the health needs of an ageing population increasingly living with chronic disease may require different care and funding models. These models should support safe, high-quality care, and ensure that general practice is vibrant, sustainable and at the heart of our primary care system.

Australia has limited health resources which must be allocated wisely. There is some interest in alternative funding models for healthcare (in part forced by the ongoing devaluation of fee-for-service payments within Medicare), but the evidence on their impact is mixed. Models including quality-based payments, pay for performance, bundled payments, or a combination of these 'value-based payments' are attractive to funders as they shift financial risk to providers and offer greater budget certainty. However, real world evidence suggests these models require large-scale upfront investment in training and information technology (IT), and may not improve health outcomes or decrease health costs.^{6,7}

The chief purpose of new care and funding models needs to be improved patient care, and not solely cost saving. As primary care develops a greater focus on efficiency and outcomes, there is a risk that aspects of care important to patients but less easily measured (such as seeing a doctor you know) are lost.⁸ This would lead to worse health outcomes and, ultimately, increasing health expenditure if Australians are unable to access the general practice care they want and need.

On specific Taskforce recommendations:

- Avant supports funding for longer consultations and incentives that better promote care for people with greatest clinical and social need.
- Voluntary patient registration has the potential to better support continuity of care for patients but will require funding for implementation and evaluation.
- We support increasing the availability of primary care services for urgent care needs. However, new services should be integrated in a way that doesn't destabilise existing practices or worsen fragmentation of care.

2. Encouraging multidisciplinary team-based care

General practice is the front line of the health system. Increasing team-based care led by GPs will enable a better utilised healthcare workforce while preserving the benefits of continuity of care, care coordination and holistic knowledge which are the core skills of GPs.⁹

Clear accountability is essential in multidisciplinary teams so that medicolegal obligations are met, and to avoid duplication or fragmentation of care. Practitioners and patients alike need to have confidence that medical indemnity issues can be appropriately addressed should they arise.

Workforce issues will require significant investment to improve workforce attraction and retention and to ensure the supply of future primary care workers. This multidisciplinary workforce is needed to guarantee quality patient outcomes as well as improved workforce satisfaction and productivity.

The administrative and compliance burden on practitioners needs to be reduced so that more time can be spent helping patients.

On specific Taskforce recommendations:

- Workforce development is a long-term commitment, however immediate action is required to improve the supply and distribution of primary care workers. Avant supports fast-tracking changes that reduce regulatory hurdles for potential GPs with appropriate training.
- We are concerned by recent initiatives that position health professionals as working to their full scope of practice but without clear integration with regular care providers. Avant supports increasing multidisciplinary team-based care led by GPs to optimise our workforce and patient care.
- There is a potential role for Primary Health Networks (PHNs) to better support local general practices with resourcing to develop teams, and to facilitate integration with other parts of the health system, using pooled funding from Commonwealth, state and other funding sources.
- PHNs already play a valuable role to commission services to underserved populations and financially disadvantaged communities, and this could be enhanced.

3. Modernising primary care

Australia's primary care system must be supported by integrated IT that allows secure and timely communication between care providers and with patients, as well as effective measurement and sharing of health outcomes.

Avant has direct experience of the benefits that technology can provide to primary care providers through its products and services such as PracticeHub, Cgov and myBeeper.

On specific Taskforce recommendations:

- Avant supports modernising My Health Record so that functionality is increased at point of care without increasing the administrative workload for GPs and practices. Priorities should include information sharing by default across healthcare providers and settings, and integration with electronic health records.
- Avant supports additional investment in developing high-quality health data and measurement systems so that the evidence base for continuous improvement and education is robust. However, this investment needs to be in addition to funding for clinical services.
- Avant also supports a general uplift in primary care IT infrastructure and education so that practices can optimise the benefits of data and digital reform.

4. Supporting change management and cultural change

There is increasing consensus on the importance of a well-functioning primary care sector to Australia's future. The issues facing the sector have been identified and documented, as has a framework for reform.

All stakeholders must now work together to design and implement solutions so that the benefits of reform are maximised and all communities are supported to be healthy and well.

On specific Taskforce recommendations:

- More work is needed to better understand the clinical care and business models of general practices in Australia and the diversity of practices. The design and implementation of reform solutions needs to support this diversity and what is locally appropriate, and not harm innovation or sustainability through inflexible or underfunded models.

- Previous reform initiatives show that healthcare providers and patients need clear and consistent support when navigating change and transitioning to new ways of working. It is of vital importance that the Government provides ongoing support for primary care, including the role of PHNs.
- Avant has strongly supported the development of practice management as a profession. It is integral to the running of a high-quality practice that is both safe and efficient. Practices and practice managers should be supported through any reform.
- Avant strongly supports staged implementation and transparency in the evaluation of reform. All stakeholders should have visibility of the design, progress and effectiveness of any reform.

References

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8. Young RA, Roberts RG and Holden RJ (2017) 'The Challenges of Measuring, Improving, and Reporting Quality in Primary Care', *Annals of Family Medicine*, 2017, Mar15(2):175-182.
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Avant is a member-owned doctors' organisation and Australia's largest medical indemnity insurer, committed to supporting a sustainable health system that provides quality care to the Australian community.

Our purpose is to provide confidence to doctors so they can keep serving the community. Our products and services in the areas of insurance, finance, and legal and practice management are all designed to support doctors throughout their lives and careers. We reinvest any profits to benefit members and the Australian healthcare community.

Over half of all Australian doctors are Avant members. Members come from all medical specialities and career stages, and every state and territory. Overall, Avant's membership includes 82,000 doctors and medical students with medical indemnity insurance and nearly 3,000 doctor-owned practices with practice indemnity protection.

Avant is committed to playing an important role in helping to design and implement health policy that benefits patients and helps doctors in better serving their community.