

Survey finds access is shaping health outcomes

New independent research has highlighted the pressures being placed on patients and their GPs due to long wait times in accessing specialist care and difficulties navigating referral pathways.

Commissioned by Australia's largest doctor-owned organisation, Avant, the research found almost half of Australian GPs say they are managing patients' complex conditions themselves because of difficulties in finding accessible public hospital outpatient appointments or where poor workforce planning has left large parts of the country unsupported by specialist services.

Long waiting times and difficulties navigating public hospital referral pathways emerged as major barriers to treatment, particularly in rural and regional communities.

The study, the first national analysis of the drivers of GP referral decision-making as well patient attitudes towards GP referrals, also found:

- Clinical suitability and access to specialists are the primary drivers of referral decisions, with cost ranking fourth out of five key considerations.
- When cost does influence referrals, it is far more likely to determine whether a patient enters the public or private system than which specialist they see.
- Waiting times are the dominant system concern, with 68% of GPs dissatisfied with referrals into the public health system and 62% of patients identifying better access as the single most important improvement needed.
- Satisfaction with specialist quality remains high, with 94% of GPs and 75% of patients satisfied with the quality of specialists available in their area.
- While 63% of GPs support the concept of the Medical Costs Finder, only 27% expect to use it regularly because of time pressures, workflow challenges and a view that financial consent is primarily the responsibility of specialists.

"The debate around specialist access often focuses on cost, but this research shows availability and navigability are just as important if not more important," Avant Chief Medical Officer Professor Steve Robson said.

"Transparency initiatives such as the Medical Costs Finder might help patients make decisions, but they won't solve the underlying problem of whether patients can actually access specialist care when they need it."

"Patients facing long waiting times for appointments at public hospital clinics or having to travel long distances to major centres to see doctors, feel their only option is seeing a doctor in the private sector," said Professor Robson.

"That puts pressure on specialists in the private sector and leaves their GPs struggling to provide care while patients are on waiting lists."

Avant Medical Advisor and Adelaide General Practitioner, Dr Sally Parsons, said the research highlighted what she sees regularly in her own practice.

"GPs told us that when specialist care is unavailable or delayed, patients often end up back in their GP's consulting room for ongoing management," Dr Parsons said.

"There have been many times where I've had to take extra steps in looking after a patient who is on a waiting list because their specialist is at capacity already. Sometimes it can take up to year to get

into a private neurologist for example. Mental health and access to psychiatrists is also another area where waiting times can be difficult to navigate.”

The research also confirmed that patients placed a high level of trust in their GP to guide them through the referral process, with referral decisions overwhelmingly driven by clinical suitability and the quality of care available to the patient.

Summary of research

The research was undertaken in May 2026 by market research and insights firm. The Navigators, on behalf of Avant.

- **GP interviews** - conducted 16 in-depth interviews with GPs from a diverse range of practice settings and backgrounds to identify the full range of factors influencing referral decisions and inform the design of the quantitative research.
- **GP survey** - surveyed 357 GPs who had recently referred patients to private specialists, capturing details on 694 referral decisions to quantify the relative importance of factors such as clinical suitability, access and cost.
- **Consumer survey** - surveyed 503 patients who had received a specialist referral in the previous 12 months to understand their experience of the referral process and the factors that influence access to specialist care.

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As Australia’s largest medical defence organisation and a member owned mutual, Avant represents more than 95,000 members—over half the nation’s medical workforce—across general practice and every specialty. Alongside medical indemnity, we provide services such as private health insurance and practice management support, giving us unique insight into the healthcare system in which doctors work.

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