

All Australians will be able to access telehealth under new \$1.1 billion coronavirus program

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Scott Morrison will unveil on Sunday a \$1.1 billion set of measures to make Medicare telehealth services generally available during the coronavirus pandemic and to support mental health, domestic violence and community services.

The “Medicare support at home” initiative will extend telehealth to the whole population. In the early stages of the pandemic, the government announced limited telehealth access.

The \$669 million medical spending will also include extra incentives for doctors.

People will be able to get consultations from their homes via telephone or video conferencing for GP services, mental health treatment, chronic disease management, and a wide range of other services that do not require face-to-face contact

This will include after hours consultations and access to nurse practitioners.

The broad telehealth service limits the exposure of patients and health professionals to the coronavirus and will take pressure off hospitals and emergency departments, while supporting self-isolation and quarantine policies.

The GP bulk billing incentive is to be doubled for GPs, whether it is a telehealth consultation or not, and an incentive payment given to ensure practices stay open for face-to-face services where patients cannot be treated through telehealth.

The new arrangements will run until September 30, when they will be reviewed.

The government is spending an initial \$74 million to help with the mental health impact of the virus crisis.

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The government's digital health portal, [Head to Health](#), will be a source of authoritative information on how to maintain good mental health during the pandemic and in self-isolation, and how to support children and others.

A national communications campaign will also provide guidance about mental wellbeing.

Money will go to bolstering the capacity of mental health support providers, who are experiencing an unprecedented surge in calls.

Health workers are to get dedicated mental health support.

To support people in aged care, who risk becoming socially isolated due to restrictions on visitors, funds will be provided to the Community Visitors Scheme, to train extra volunteers, who will connect with older people online and by telephone.

Funding will also go to assisting young people "stay on track" in their education and training, via the headspace digital work and study service and eheadsace.

For indigenous Australians, culturally appropriate mental health support will also receive funding.

An initial \$150 million will go to supporting people experiencing domestic, family, and sexual violence due to the fallout from coronavirus.

Some \$200 million will support charities and other community organisations that provide emergency and food relief as demand increases.

Vulnerable people will be helped with bills, food, clothing and other needs such as financial

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counselling through this community support package.

Scott Morrison said: “As we battle coronavirus on both the health and economic fronts with significant support packages in place and more to come, I am very aware many Australians are understandably anxious, stressed and fearful about the impacts of coronavirus and what it brings.

“This new support package will provide much needed care and help to so many Australians facing hardship”

Family and Social Services Minister Anne Ruston said given the unprecedented situation, emergency relief services would likely be relied on more heavily in coming months “than we have seen in our lifetimes.”

“Many people reaching out to these services may have never needed this type of assistance before,” she said.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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