

Australian Health Ministers Conference

Communiqué

5 March 2009

Today's meeting of Health Ministers showed what can happen when governments are prepared to work together to deliver better health policy.

Most notably, final results for last year's blitz on elective surgery waiting times were announced.

In 2008, a target was set of delivering an extra 25,000 elective surgery procedures. That figure was exceeded, with more than 40,000 extra procedures undertaken.

That means the target was exceeded by more than 16,000 or 64 per cent.

Under Stage One of the Elective Surgery Waiting List Reduction Plan, the Federal Government gave states and territories \$150 million to provide an additional 25,278 elective surgery procedures by 31 December 2008.

All states and territories dramatically exceeded their targets, providing 41,584 more hip, knee and other important elective surgery procedures in 2008 than in 2007.

Elective surgery data as at 31st December 2008:

State	Total funding Stage One (\$m)	Target additional procedures in 2008	Additional procedures provided in 2008
NSW	43.3	8,743	12,153
VIC	34.2	5,908	13,478
QLD	27.6	4,000	5,928
WA	15.4	2,720	3,727
SA	13.6	2,262	3,196
TAS	8.1	895	1,606
ACT	2.5	250	858
NT	5.3	500	638
Total	150.0	25,278	41,584

National registration and accreditation

Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to a national registration and accreditation scheme for health professions reflecting the principles set out in the Intergovernmental Agreement. Members of the Ministerial Council noted substantial progress had been made in developing the scheme. It was agreed that Ministers would continue work on the scheme and reconvene again to consider further progress following the Queensland elections, when the Queensland Government is no longer in caretaker mode.

Progress made today on safety measures will deliver important protections to patients, specifically:

- Mandatory reporting of professionals who are placing the public at risk of harm. This means that other practitioners or employers (like hospitals) must report conduct which puts patients at harm, including practising under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or sexual misconduct.
- Mandatory criminal history and identity checks for all health professionals registering for the first time in Australia. All other registrants will be required to make an annual declaration on criminal history matters when they renew their registration.

Privacy consultation and individual healthcare identifier

Consistent with the Council of Australian Governments agreement that all Australian residents will be allocated an individual healthcare identifier (IHI), Health Ministers agreed to continuing consultations on privacy protections that will be necessary to underpin this important health initiative.

The IHI will support better linkage of patient information and communication between healthcare providers involved in patient treatment, but will not need to be declared for an individual to receive healthcare. The IHI will not replace the Medicare number, which is used for claiming government healthcare benefits.

Implementation of the IHI will be supported by a strong and effective legislative framework that includes governance arrangements, permitted uses and privacy safeguards.

Strong privacy protection for patient health information is fundamental to delivering high quality individual and public health outcomes. Individuals rightly expect a high level of protection for their personal health information.

It is essential that privacy arrangements appropriately meet community expectations and balance the need to protect the privacy of personal information with the healthcare benefits that can be gained through better sharing of health information.

Government consultations are currently underway about the recommendations contained in the report by the Australian Law Reform Commission of its review of Australian privacy laws, including health privacy protections.

Further consultations are now planned to build on stakeholder feedback that has already been provided on the ALRC proposals and provide an opportunity to consider particular issues relating to privacy safeguards for national eHealth initiatives. A report on the outcomes will be provided to COAG by mid-2009. Arrangements for consultation are being developed.

More work will have to be done on this before an IHI can be implemented.

National Mental Health Policy

Health Ministers also launched Australia's new National Mental Health Policy 2008 which represents a renewed commitment by all governments to the continual improvement of Australia's mental health system.

The Policy works towards ensuring that Australia has a mental health system that detects and intervenes early in illness, promotes recovery, and ensures that all Australians with a mental illness have access to effective and appropriate treatment and community supports to enable them to participate in the community fully.

The Policy embeds a whole-of-government approach to mental health, first agreed to by the Council of Australian Governments in July 2006, within the National Mental Health Strategy. The policy provides a strategic framework to support improved mental health outcomes for people at risk of or experiencing mental health problems or mental illness. It also recognises that certain groups in the community, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, homeless and disadvantaged people, those exposed to traumatic events, and those with serious or chronic health problems are at heightened risk of mental health problems and mental illness.

Work has commenced on the development of a fourth National Mental Health Plan in the context of a whole of government approach. Ministers agreed that the revised National Mental Health Policy will provide the basis for the development of the Fourth Plan. The Australian Government held national consultations in February 2009, and State and Territory Governments are conducting consultations in February and March 2009.

Media Contact: Angie Drake, Minister Gallagher's Office, 0408-092-016

Sean Kelly, Minister Roxon's Office, (02) 6277-7220