

Media Release

Changes to Disability Support Pension flawed

Tuesday, 20 June 2017

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) strongly opposes the Government's efforts to limit access to the Disability Support Pension (DSP) for people with serious drug and alcohol issues.

Changes announced in last month's federal budget will alter the way people with addiction issues are assessed for the DSP. The Government estimates that around 450 fewer people will be eligible for the DSP and the RACP is concerned that people with serious health issues could 'fall through the gaps' of the new system.

"Many people hold the view that drug and alcohol addiction is self-inflicted and easy to overcome but as doctors we know the reality is more complex," explained RACP President, Dr Catherine Yelland.

"Drug and alcohol addiction is a serious health problem that can result in many forms of functional and cognitive impairment. A complicating factor in many cases is that patients are often experiencing other issues such as mental health problems, homelessness, trauma, and intergenerational disadvantage.

"We are talking about support for some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

"If passed by Parliament, this measure will hurt around 450 people every year and their families. Importantly, it won't encourage people with drug and alcohol problems to seek the support or treatment they need from drug and alcohol treatment services."

As part of this measure, *Table 6 – Functioning related to alcohol, drug and other substance use* will be removed from the [Tables for the assessment of work-related impairment for Disability Support Pension](#).

Applicants will instead be assessed against the remaining impairment tables but will have to prove that any substance abuse issues are fully diagnosed, treated and stabilised before they are able to qualify.

People who do not qualify for support may receive Newstart or Youth Allowance payments. These payments are 'activity tested' which means people must satisfy certain criteria each fortnight in order to meet their 'mutual obligations' and receive their payment.

Dr Yelland said the measure was developed without adequate consultation with the clinicians who treat people with drug and alcohol addiction.

"The RACP believes any changes to the existing criteria should be made in consultation with clinicians who understand the complexities of dealing with and overcoming addiction," Dr Yelland said.

"If the Government believes the existing impairment tables can be improved then the RACP welcomes the opportunity to provide clinical advice and ensure these vulnerable people and their families are not disadvantaged by this change."

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About The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP): The RACP trains, educates and advocates on behalf of more than 15,000 physicians and 7,500 trainee physicians across Australia and New Zealand.

The College represents a broad range of medical specialties including general medicine, paediatrics and child health, cardiology, respiratory medicine, neurology, oncology, public health medicine, occupational and environmental medicine, palliative medicine, sexual health medicine, rehabilitation medicine, geriatric medicine and addiction medicine. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to developing health and social policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients.

The College offers 60 training pathways. These lead to the award of one of seven qualifications that align with 45 specialist titles recognised by the Medical Board of Australia or allow for registration in nine vocational scopes with the Medical Council of New Zealand.