

Equity across priority populations

In order for Australians to enjoy the highest possible standard of health and wellbeing, health resources must be prioritised according to the principles of equity and need, delivered by a culturally safe and pro-equity health system.

The RACP's recommendations to the incoming Government to deliver equity across priority populations focus on seven key areas further detailed in this section:

1. Support Indigenous self-determination and leadership to close the gap on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health
2. Support children and young people to catch up from the setbacks of COVID-19
3. Support older Australians' wellbeing and independence
4. Support people with disability's individual autonomy through an equitable, effective and responsive disability support system
5. Support people with substance use disorders through easier access to evidence-based treatments and medication
6. Support Australian workers' health and wellbeing
7. Empower patients and carers to actively participate in their care through improved health literacy.

Support Indigenous self-determination and leadership to close the gap on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health

Although some gains have been made in recent years, the health disparities and resulting shorter life expectancies experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain unacceptable, especially when compared with continued improvements in non-Indigenous health.¹

Complex factors have contributed to the current situation including the ongoing effects of colonisation, dispossession, and loss of identity, culture and land. Social determinants of health also impact on Indigenous Australians' health: poverty, housing, environment, education, employment, social capital and racism, discrimination, and culturally unsafe health services all contribute to poor health outcomes.

Achieving equitable health outcomes for Indigenous Australians requires "full and genuine partnership" with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as outlined in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.ⁱ As stated in the Hon Greg Hunt MP's *Message from the Minister* in the recently released National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031,ⁱⁱ "the COVID-19 response, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leaders and ACCHS, is an exemplar of what can be achieved when partnerships are based on empowerment, trust and mutual respect."

The RACP supports the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#) which includes Constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the development of a Treaty, and we recognise the health benefits of genuine reconciliation.

Government action and appropriate resourcing is required to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health inequities, to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as a human right and as a component of national reconciliation.

The RACP calls on the incoming Government to fully support Indigenous self-determination and leadership to close the gap on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health by:

¹ Note: The latest [Australian Government Closing the Gap Report 2020](#) outlined that "in 2015–2017 life expectancy at birth was 71.6 years for Indigenous males (8.6 years less than non-Indigenous males) and 75.6 years for Indigenous females (7.8 years less than non-Indigenous females). It found that "over the period 2006 to 2018, there was an improvement of almost 10 per cent in Indigenous age-standardised mortality rates", "however, non-Indigenous mortality rates improved at a similar rate, so the gap has not narrowed."

- Committing to implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart recommendations which includes the Constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the development of a Treaty
- Committing to fully fund the effective implementation of the newly released National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Continuing to fund and promote MBS Item 715 for Indigenous health check. This is a comprehensive preventative health assessment designed specifically to support the health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to help identify risk factors for chronic disease to manage the good health of the patient.²

Support children and young people to catch up from the setbacks of COVID-19

Whether it is the loss of education from missed face-to-face teaching, the emotional impact of reduced social connection with their peers, or the lack of access to sport and recreational activities, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many parts of children’s lives that contribute to their development, mental health and wellbeing.

We know that the impact has not been equal. COVID-19 has amplified existing inequalities across our communities, impacting most on children from low-socio-economic backgrounds, First Nations children, children from culturally diverse backgrounds, children with disability and children experiencing family violence.

The incoming Government must prioritise children and young people’s health and wellbeing and their recovery from the setbacks of COVID-19 to put Australian kids and their futures back on track.³

The RACP calls on the incoming Government to **support children and young people to catch up from the setbacks of COVID-19** by:

- Appointing a National Chief Paediatrician to work with children, young people and families to provide clinical leadership and advocacy for their health and wellbeing.
- Establishing a National COVID-19 Taskforce to lead a recovery plan. The Taskforce should be co-led by the Chief Paediatrician and the National Children’s Commissioner and children, young people and families need to have a strong voice in shaping the recovery plan.
- Funding and implementing the National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy including the substantial expansion of mental health support for children, young people and their families, with a focus on prevention, equitable access, and national coordination.
- Increasing the Commonwealth funding for school support for students with disability or with learning difficulties and ensuring that additional learning support is evidence informed and enables children to re-engage with school and their peers.
- Implementing universal access to quality early childhood education programs for all three-year-olds. Early childhood education currently focuses on children aged 4-5 years, but evidence

² Note on MBS Item 715: These health checks should include an assessment of the patient’s physical, psychological, and social wellbeing. This could be a key tool in identifying early risk for obesity in Indigenous children as it is available to The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Health Assessment is available to children between ages of 0 and 14 years. The 715 Health assessment can lead onto a number of MBS Item Number other Health Assessments and Management Plans such as follow-up Health Services provided by a Practice Nurse or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioner for an Indigenous Person who has received a health assessment (MBS ITEM 10987) and/or follow-up allied health service for people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent including a dietician. Many of these follow-on item numbers can be made available on a calendar year up to 10 times at no cost to the patient or family.

³ The RACP has recently launched the [Kids Catch Up Campaign](#) which calls on stakeholders including Government to “Make kids a top priority as we rebuild from the pandemic”

shows the importance of including 3-year-old children, especially for children experiencing disadvantage.

- Restricting marketing of unhealthy diets to children and young people by establishing mandatory regulations to restrict the marketing of unhealthy diets to children and young people.

Support older Australians' wellbeing and independence

The stated aims of the Australian aged care system are to promote the wellbeing and independence of older people (and their carers), by enabling them to stay in their own homes or by assisting them in residential care.^{iv}

As recently highlighted by the findings of the Royal Commission for Aged Care Quality and Safety and by the significant loss of lives of aged care residents from COVID-19, the infrastructure of the aged care system is not resourced to meet present and future needs safely and effectively. Too many older Australians are not getting the support and care they need to enable them to live a decent quality of life with dignity.

The RACP calls on the incoming Government to **support older Australians' wellbeing and independence** by:

- Committing to urgently implementing the wide-ranging recommendations outlined in the Final Report of the Royal Commission for Aged Care Quality and Safety to provide care, dignity and respect for all older people living in Australia.
- Increasing the availability of Home Care Packages (HCPs) to eliminate delays in access which frequently lead to progressive impairment and loss of independence

Support people with disability's individual autonomy through an equitable, effective and responsive disability support system

People with disability experience increased risk factors for health conditions, increased morbidity, and increased mortality and have poor mental and physical health compared to others in the community. Many of the health conditions that are experienced by people with disability across the life span are often unrecognised, misdiagnosed and poorly managed compared to the general population.

People with disability are more likely to live in poverty, have poor-quality or insecure housing, low levels of workforce participation and education, and be socially excluded or marginalised. They are particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination. This disparity, along with ensuing stress to family members and carers, is unacceptable. Health care policies and programs should include specific consideration of how the needs of people with disability will be met.

The RACP calls on the incoming Government to **support people with disability's individual autonomy through an equitable, effective and responsive disability support system** by:

- Ensuring the NDIS remains appropriately funded and that full transparency is provided over future sustainability issues. Particular attention should be paid to improving linkage and communication between clients of and staff working in the health and disability sectors, including access to appropriate specialist disability management and rehabilitation services, discharge planning from hospital, disability training for physicians and other healthcare professionals and implementation of Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031.
- Providing appropriate funding for specialty complex care for young people living with disability to support continuity of care and access across settings, including in the community.
- Providing appropriate funding for people living with disabilities to be able to access specialist multidisciplinary rehabilitation services to assist in maintaining continued autonomy and wellness in the community.
- Ensuring the effective implementation of the [National Roadmap for Improving the Health of People with Intellectual Disability](#)
- Funding the development of a comprehensive cultural competence framework for the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) to help improve the experience of the NDIS for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Support people with substance use disorders through easier access to evidence-based treatments and medication

The consumption of alcohol and other drugs is widespread in Australia and substance use disorders affect around 1 in 20 Australians.^v Those working in the alcohol and other drug sector have consistently highlighted the severe shortages of treatment services in Australia over decades. The current system is estimated to leave up to half a million Australians without access to the treatment services they need to effectively address their substance use disorder.^{vi} It is estimated that the alcohol and other drug treatment system needs a boost of at least \$1 billion per year^{vii} if it is to address this unmet demand.

The extensive disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to have exacerbated and led to increased problematic alcohol and other drugs use amongst the many Australians who are struggling. This makes the need for increased funding for effective treatment services and evidence-based harm reduction measures in the alcohol and other drugs sector even more pressing.

The RACP calls on the incoming Government to **support people with substance use disorders through easier access to evidence-based treatments and medication** by:

- Investing adequately in the prevention and treatment of harms arising from the misuse of alcohol and other drugs, including enhanced services as critical parts of the general and mental healthcare systems and better more accessible treatment options.
- Committing funding for increased access and affordability of opioid pharmacotherapies for people with opioid dependency, including by permanently establishing COVID-era changes to the delivery of medication assisted treatment of opioid dependence as set out in the [Interim Guidance endorsed by the RACP, the RANZCP, the RACGP and the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia](#).^{viii}
- Continuing funding for free take-home naloxone medication to consumers, friends and family. This should be done through the expansion of the Commonwealth take-home naloxone pilot^{ix} to continue permanently for all of Australia.

Support Australian workers' health and wellbeing

Supporting the health of the workforce is essential to maintain a functioning and healthy economy and society.

This requires the Government to implement effective programs for preventive health and return to work to maintain Australia's workforce and ensure workers are safe at work.

The RACP calls on the incoming Government to **support Australian workers' health and wellbeing** by:

- Establish a National Workplace Health Unit to provide guidance and support to Australian workplaces to assess, control and monitor risks to workplace health and wellbeing, and optimise programmes to positively promote good health at work⁴ and positive return to work outcomes. The unit should focus on health risks, as these can often go unrecognised compared to safety risks at work.
- Providing ongoing funding for the implementation of the recommendations from the [National Dust Disease Taskforce](#), including operationalising the National Occupational Respiratory Disease Registry and establishing a dedicated cross-jurisdictional governance mechanism with clinical leadership to oversee implementation.

Empower patients and carers to actively participate in their care through improved health literacy

Health literacy is an essential building block to empowering consumer and carers to make informed decisions about their care. Low levels of health literacy are linked to worse health outcomes and adverse health behaviours such as lower engagement with health services including preventive health services, higher hospital re-admission rates, poorer understanding of medical instructions and lower ability to self-manage care.^x

The RACP calls on the incoming Government to **empower patients and carers to actively participate in their care through improved health literacy** by:

- Allocating funding to make health information and systems more responsive and accessible to consumers and carers with varying levels of health literacy and ensure health-related information is available and accessible to communities of diverse culture and linguistical backgrounds.
- Designing and funding initiatives to improve consumer and carer health literacy including social and interactive skills through measures to improve digital literacy
- Investing in improving the health literacy of support health care workers, prioritising strategies for disability support workers, including those who are part of the intellectual disability support workforce.

ⁱ Closing the Gap website: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement> [last accessed 03/03/2022]

⁴ As defined by RACP's Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine's (AFOEM) Health Benefits of Good Work™ initiative.; <https://www.racp.edu.au/advocacy/division-faculty-and-chapter-priorities/faculty-of-occupational-environmental-medicine/health-benefits-of-good-work> [last accessed 16/03/2022]

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