



**Provision of general practitioner
and related primary health services
to outer metropolitan, rural and
regional Australians**



**Youth Action's Submission to the Senate
Community Affairs References Committee**

Acknowledgment of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and understands that sovereignty was never ceded. Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people and we recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



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About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak body representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups. Our vision is for a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged and valued, and their rights are realised.

Principles that underpin our work:

- We give a particular focus to regional young people, First Nations young people, those doing it tough, those with disability, LGBTIQ+, and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees.
- We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches and are informed by data and evidence.
- We are an ally to self-determination of First Nations communities and are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector to be a trusted partner and collaborator.

Introduction

Youth Action welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs with respect to the provision of general practitioner and related primary health services to outer metropolitan, rural, and regional Australians.

This submission is grounded in the voices and lived-experiences of rural and regional young people who have shared their concerns with Youth Action. Despite the provision of general practitioners (GPs) and related primary health services in rural and regional areas, access and affordability are significant barriers which impact upon young people's ability engage with the healthcare system. It is important for future solutions to incorporate these concerns in order to improve access to the healthcare system. Young people would like further education around Medicare, privacy, healthcare rights and the health system generally to improve their engagement and health outcomes with GPs and related primary health services. Additionally, young people's positive reflections upon telehealth and the benefit of youth-friendly health services provide useful insight into what is currently working well.

Recommendations

1. The Government continue to consult with rural and regional young people to incorporate their lived experience into solutions addressing their access and engagement with GPs and related primary health services.
2. Explore options for increasing the provision of bulk-billed appointments under Medicare for all young people up to the age of 24, in particular those with no income or on a low income.
3. Improve the provision of education and information for young people about Medicare, the costs of accessing the health system, and privacy and healthcare rights. This could be made available to young people directly through education institutions or youth programs as well as being available within medical services.
4. Continue the provision of telehealth services to young people in rural or regional areas.
5. Develop a program of training and resources development for GPs and related primary health services to ensure best practices when working with young people and youth-friendly healthcare settings.

Methodology

While Youth Action does not work in the provision of primary health services, we currently receive funding from NSW Ministry of Health for our Ask for Health, Youth Health Literacy Program which alongside our role as a peak body provides us with opportunities to engage with young people and the youth sector throughout NSW.

To inform this submission, Youth Action conducted a targeted consultation session with 15 young people aged between 12-24 from rural and regional NSW in September 2021. All of these people completed a survey and 10 of these young people attended an online group consultation. The demographics of this group included First Nations young people, LGBTIQ+ young people, young people living with a disability, migrant and refugee young people and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. 7 of these young people identified themselves as doing it tough, for example tackling challenges such as poverty, homelessness, mental health, substance use issues or in contact with child protection or criminal justice systems.

We have also included insights from 68 young people who have previously shared their health experiences and concerns with Youth Action through our Health Literacy Advisory Council.

a. The current state of outer metropolitan, rural, and regional GPs and related services

Access

Young people identified the advantages of having a regular GP and its follow-on benefits for accessing health services, including feeling less likely to be judged, familiarity with services and greater confidence when accessing the healthcare system. However unfortunately, some young people find it difficult to access GPs and related primary health services due to limited availability and other barriers.

“Access to GPs in regional and rural areas is challenging. As someone with an autoimmune disease, I need to plan to see my doctor around 6 to 8 weeks ahead of when I run out of medication, or I just have to wait. This is the standard wait time for appointments across our region”.

“I have experienced so many difficulties in accessing good health care as a young person in my area... I have seen first-hand just how important it is to create a system in which young people are comfortable and confident in accessing easy to navigate, affordable health care”.

Transport was mentioned as a common barrier to accessing GPs and other health services. Young people who did not have access to their own car described being particularly disadvantaged, as public transport in regional and rural areas could be limited and the costs of taxis is prohibitive.

“For me, getting into an appointment and to the doctors themselves is easier and less time consuming because I have a car”.

“Public transport can eat up most of your day... in some more rural areas where there is less public transport it could be difficult for teens or those without cars to make appointments”.

Young people discussed the importance of finding a GP with whom they felt comfortable. Young women said it was important for them to have a female GP, however this can be difficult to find due to limited numbers of GPs in various regions.

“There should be more access to female GPs and specialists”.

“I am a 14-year-old girl, I don't always feel comfortable alone in a room with an old man.”

Other barriers discussed by young people from rural and regional areas included the stigma associated with approaching a GP and the limited opening hours of local health services.

“Other commitments like school and work conflict with the opening hours of health services. In my experiences and interactions with people, the most effective service seems to be those that are online or through the phone - as these can be accessible without the need for transport and there is an added element of anonymity”.

“Social stigma of feeling like something is wrong is also a barrier for people seeking help, especially amongst teen boys. There is also a potential fear of going to the doctors in young people as they tend to not want to go alone or at all”.

Once connected with a health service, young people in rural or regional areas said that limited appointment availability can pose additional challenges in managing health conditions. Multiple young people discussed their experience of having secured a GP they like, however then their books fill up quickly and they don't take on new patients, or their doctor moving away from the area and they cannot find another that they connect with.

“I do not think GPs are accessible... I found one quickly but then they moved overseas without telling me”.

“I find that you can only book an individual appointment if they are already your family GP. If you are trying to access without that, there is long waitlists and it is extremely hard”.

“He moved... ever since we haven't found a doctor that believes what my Mum is saying”.

Young people spoke at length about difficulties accessing health services for mental health, sexual health and substance use issues in rural and regional areas. These concerns were often associated with a greater level of stigma young people felt about seeing a professional for issues such as mental health. They were worried about what others thought about them.

“There is still a massive stigma around accessing help for mental health concerns and that it would be shameful to be seen entering Headspace... so many young people don't know when to ask for help or how they can get that help”.

“The integral issues pertaining to young people are mental health, accessibility to healthcare services, breaking stigmas and cultural and linguistic barriers. These issues are exacerbated in regional and marginalised communities and the importance of resolving these complications is increased when we look at young people from migrant, indigenous and refugee communities”.

“Some of the most important health issues young people are facing in NSW include access to mental health facilities, drug and sex clinics as well as support groups. This is as in places such as regional NSW young people do not have support groups to turn to in times of need. It is important we look after the safety and wellbeing of the upcoming generation”.

Young people also said they find it challenging to navigate the health system on their own, especially those living independently from family. Young people with complex health issues spoken about the need to have support people to assist them to determine what they need. Some said being listed their families Medicare card caused complications but were unsure whether they should get their own card.

Other young people discussed positive impacts living in a rural or regional area can have in regard to access to health services. Some said it was easier to get to know services and staff in a smaller area. Others said they felt said that COVID-19 has increased awareness of health more broadly. Young people mentioned that COVID-19 has encouraged re-engagement with GPs and people may seek help for other issues whilst getting vaccinated.

“Medical professionals in smaller rural areas know each other more and are upon better terms with each other since it is such a small tight-knit community. This means better care for young people as it facilitates quicker transfer between GP's and specialists and generally between medical professionals - leading to less waiting and more efficient treatment for young people”.

Affordability

Youth Action would like to see greater exploration about the possibility of extending access bulk-billed appointments at a local GP, mental health, and other health services for young people under the age of 24, especially those with no income or on low incomes.

“It is extremely hard to get into a bulk-billing GP”.

“Bulk-billing doctors are not taking new patients”

Out-of-pocket expenses present a significant barrier to young people when accessing GPs and other primary related health services. Many young people felt that GPs were unaffordable and shared their experiences of facing difficulty when looking for a bulk-billing GP. In addition, cost barriers encouraged young people and their families to limit their engagement with a GPs and deal with health issues with as few appointments as possible. We heard from young people that finding bulk-billing or affordable services was particularly challenging in the mental health context.

"In some rural and urban areas, health services are quite expensive, which usually put youth off from finding help for their issue. Finding ways for youth to afford and access vital health services will really help some areas that struggle in these times".

"There is GPs in most suburbs but they are expensive".

"You may not have the financial means to pay for the service or the transportation to get there".

All young people in the consultation agree that the cost of seeing a mental health professional such as a psychologist or psychiatrist is a significant barrier to seeking help. They appreciated the subsidised visits that can be accessed using GP referred mental health plan however a number of young people spoke about living with long term, chronic mental health issues that required more appointments than currently provided within a care plan.

"I believe young people find it difficult to access high quality, low-cost or free health care services, particularly mental health services. Often access to these mental health care services in NSW is limited to those who can afford it either through private health insurance, or out of pocket payments. Without access to these services, the mental health of young people is suffering".

The bulk-billing discretion exercised within medical practices creates confusion amongst young people and has a prohibitive impact upon access. Where a young person cannot clearly identify whether or not they will be bulk-billed by a service, this can lead to delay or avoidance in treating their health condition. Young people expressed desire for more education and information about Medicare and how it operates, which can assist them in making informed decisions about their healthcare.

"An issue is the lack of education or clear information around Medicare and private health funds. In the transition from childhood to adulthood, the differences between private and public healthcare, the levies

"I feel like a lot of young people also don't know what Medicare is or how to access it etc, which makes it ineffective"

"It tends to work very well for children under 18".

"The language around accessibility to access your own Medicare is extremely confusing".

"Education is so important – I know a lot of people my age [15] only have a vague idea of what Medicare is and what it does... we really need to educate young people about it".

Specific challenges associated with affordability or Medicare arose for young people living with a disability, in the out-of-home care system or with other unique experiences. It is important that responses are tailored to address this diversity of need.

"For foster children in particular, we are forced to have our own Medicare card as soon as we can but aren't told what we can do with the card."

"Being able to afford the specialised equipment for athletes with disabilities".

b. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on doctor shortages in outer metropolitan, rural, and regional Australia

GP Shortages

Young people reported mixed experiences about whether or not there was a shortage of GPs in their area. Multiple young people in regional areas felt that even where GPs were available in their area, barriers such as cost or transport impacted their access. For young people in smaller rural areas, it appeared that GP shortages were more significant, reporting long waiting times, the need to travel significant distances and the limited choice between services. In addition, young people often said that while GPs were available in their area, mental health services were not.

“The doctor shortage in rural areas is a big one. It firstly leads to there being a smaller pool of medical professionals from which young people can choose one that they are most comfortable with. The doctor shortage also leads to longer wait times and thus can also lead to less frequent appointments which may be needed. Lastly, in rural areas, not all medical specialties might be available, leading to the need to travel out of town to seek appropriate medical treatment”.

“It can be difficult to get fast access to a GP due to the lack of doctors. For example, it would not be unsurprising for someone living in a rural town to have to travel up to one hour to see their nearest GP [and] may need to travel long distances or relocate to attend health services or receive specialised treatment”.

Telehealth

The increased popularity of telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic has improved access to health services for some young people. This has particular benefits for young people in rural or regional areas, where there is limited availability of face-to-face GPs or a preference to access health professionals from outside of their local community.

“Telehealth, even before the pandemic, was an opportunity for young people to access mental health services with reduced stigma in a more personal, discreet environment that provides them the opportunity to take the first step and access the healthcare they need”.

“Lots of my friends/peers have used it and said that it was extremely effective”.

“The increasing access to the internet and online health services for booking appointments, researching topics of interest and understanding medical needs is increasing and making a positive impact on the ability to access health services”.

A number of young people spoke positively about telehealth. They said it provided an important alternative pathway for regional young people to seek health services, especially in areas with limited options.

“It works in certain situations... I really do like not having to go in (to the GP) when it is something I can explain over the phone. However, I have had situations where I really need to go in, but they are not open in person due to COVID-19”.

Young people identified being familiar and comfortable with 24/hr support lines and online mental health groups. They felt even before COVID these were well utilised.

Emergency hotline services deliver their services over the phone, such as Lifeline, were positively identified for their accessibility to all young people irrespective of location or financial situation.

“Organisations such as Lifeline Australia and Beyond blue are excellent support services providing options for immediate 24/7 access via phone and live messaging, and a highly valued by young people due to being free, easy to access via any device and also at difficult times when one needs immediate support”.

“These days, there are many online support networks, such as headspace, which can provide young people with support from a trained health professional for free or at a low cost”.

However, young people explained that it was not suitable for all health issues and not accessible to all young people. These circumstances included where a young person had a disability, lived in a location without strong internet or telephone reception or found it difficult to feel comfortable speaking with a health professional over the phone. Another barrier reported was that it can be difficult to access telehealth with a GP if you have never been a patient with their practice before.

“I have mild hearing loss and phone calls are generally challenging for me. So, it's not a service aimed at me”.

“In the mental health context, you need to be able to bond and trust your mental health professional”.

Some young people were unaware of the availability of telehealth, which suggests more work could be done to improve knowledge and access to these services.

“I have never heard of telehealth in my entire life... it is definitely not pushed in my area”.

“I didn't know about until a friend mentioned it to me a few months ago”.

c. Any other related matters impacting outer metropolitan, rural, and regional access to quality health services.

Privacy and Healthcare Rights

Young people are concerned about their privacy and healthcare rights when accessing general practitioners and other health services. Insights from some young people suggest that they lack confidence they will receive adequate privacy, confidentiality and respect in their care. This appears to be particularly concerning for young people in rural and regional areas where there are fewer health services to select from. Noteworthy is that the rise of telehealth has the potential to provide young people with access to GPs from outside of their area, alleviating some of these concerns.

“Many [young people] are unaware of their rights and responsibilities when it comes to health, and ensuring that they know who and where to turn to when in need of medical attention is vital”.

“In rural areas it can be embarrassing to see the one local GP”.

“For many teens and young people, it is difficult to access services anonymously or without the aid of parents or guardians. This is an issue for lots of people, especially when it comes to getting help for mental health”.

“Accessing mental health care and being able to trust healthcare workers with sensitive information is an important issue. Young people, especially those under 18 or those still living at home, might find it harder to access healthcare with a level of confidentiality”.

Youth Action knows that young people want clear information available online about this issue. Further education is needed to support young people in navigating the healthcare system. In addition, this should assist with understanding their rights and obligations. It is currently difficult for some young people to access services without involving their parents or guardians, which may delay or prevent treatment.

“As a young person these experiences can be awkward and confusing, leading to fear and disinterest in seeking health professionals' advice. This is something I have witnessed on multiple occasions... [I believe] having laws surround sexual health and youth privacy rights more adequately available would make a huge difference to the health of young people”.

“Navigating the healthcare system... understanding how to use Medicare, understanding confidentiality with health practitioners, understanding how to choose a GP who is right [for you] and [has] a self-determined approach to health”.

“We don't want to talk about but need to talk about reporting health professionals for misconduct... this is a route that many young people need to go down but lack the education or experience to find the resources to act upon their needs.”

The Need for Youth-Friendly Health Services

Young people supported the continued development of targeted responses to address their health concerns. There needs to be further training and resource development for health care professionals about working with young people, including cultural safety and trauma-informed practice. Young people believed it was important for health professionals to receive training and have access to resources about best practices when working with young people.

“It might be important to me... you shouldn't just brush it off straight away”.

“For myself, I have found that even basic features can make immense differences in whether I engage with a health service or provider long-term... [for example] short appointment times, responsiveness to emails and phone calls, and transparency in treatment with issues like medication. I often feel that features like my young age are used to presume I lack the understanding necessary to understand ‘complex’ issues”.

“Lack of youth, CALD and LGBTQIA friendly health services: Young people want to see health practitioners that understand their concerns. Young people do not want to feel ashamed because their health practitioner is judgemental”.

“I have had a school counsellor brush off my concerns about my mental health”.

Small changes can significantly improve the experience and engagement of young people with health services. Youth Action heard that young people want to feel validated, believed and listened to by their GP or other health professional. Young people shared with us the qualities that make a health service work well for young people.

“It has to have good values, people need to be empathetic, understanding and kind. Accessible for everyone, not just the majority but minority groups, people with a disability and others”.

“We still have that mentality in my area that ‘guys have got to be macho’, so I would say making health services less obvious could make them more accessible”.

“A good health system should give options, you should have a variety when picking a GP or specialist, you should have bulk-billing options, that is important as a young person”.

“They need to be friendly; they need to be approachable”.

“Young people should feel comfortable and welcome”.

Conclusion

Young people are eager to participate in changes to improve their access to GPs and related primary health services in rural and regional areas. As presented throughout this submission, increased access, affordability, youth friendly health services and information about the healthcare system could have a positive impact upon the management of young people's health. Youth Action is happy to provide further information to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs upon request.

**YOUTH
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