

# Fears for culturally and linguistically diverse patients avoiding healthcare due to COVID-19

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) patients are being urged to take care of their health and contact their GP for any issues following concerns some may be avoiding medical care due to fear of the COVID-19 virus.

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP), Consumer Health Forum of Australia (CHF), and Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) are urging patients from CALD communities not to neglect their health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It comes after Metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire in Victoria were placed back under stage three restrictions due to an increase in COVID-19 cases. There are further pockets of community transmission in other urban and regional areas in the eastern states, particularly Victoria and New South Wales.

RACGP spokesperson Dr Kate Walker said even in these difficult times it was important for patients to see their GP for any health concerns including mental health concerns.

“We are very concerned for CALD patients who may be avoiding important medical appointments due to fear of COVID-19. There are higher rates of chronic disease and other comorbidities among some CALD communities.

“The last thing we want to see is an increase in health issues due to patients delaying care – MBS data showed a decrease of more than one million consultations in May, compared to the same time last year.

“GPs have told us their CALD patients are bearing the brunt of the pandemic. We are hearing of vulnerable patients who've lost work and are under a great deal of stress, GPs are seeing increased mental health symptoms, isolation and loneliness.

“CALD communities already face barriers to healthcare, so it's critical that we get the message to these patients about the importance of maintaining care during the pandemic – as well as public health messages for COVID-19.

“I want to reassure all patients that it remains safe to visit your GP. Practices have strict infection prevention measures in place. You can also access a GP remotely with telehealth consultations and free interpreter services. So if you need an appointment, please don't delay.

“We've seen in the United Kingdom and the United States, African American and CALD communities have high rates of COVID-19 and higher rates of death. The current outbreaks in Melbourne have been in areas with high numbers of CALD communities. It is essential that CALD communities across Australia are able to access COVID-19 health advice in their language, including information about testing, how to self-isolate, quarantine and contact tracing. CALD patients with COVID-19 would also benefit from remote care and support from their communities.

“Asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants face greater barriers to care and may be more mistrustful of government and reluctant to get tested. We are concerned there is a lack of messaging about testing options for those without a Medicare card.”

FECCA Chairperson Mary Patetsos said more needed to be done to address the barriers CALD communities face to healthcare.

“We need to recognise the barriers CALD communities face to healthcare including language and cultural barriers, which may affect health literacy and outcomes. We need equity in services to ensure those communities are not disadvantaged.

“GPs have a role to play here – we encourage GPs to be proactive and reach out to their CALD patients who may need reassurance that it is safe and important to keep their regular health checks.

“We urge health authorities to consult and collaborate with CALD consumer peak bodies, such as FECCA, to address the challenges and needs of CALD Australians when it comes to their health care.”

CHF CEO Leanne Wells said: “If our national health system is to provide care for those who most need it, then we need greater focus on reaching CALD people who too often miss out on care because barriers such as language, bad past experiences,

location and opening times and transport. To fail to do so risks further widening health inequalities between CALD communities and others.”

“We know that poor health literacy – the ability to understand and use the health system – means greater risk of ill-health and continuing untreated chronic illness.

“Governments must give greater priority to ensuring CALD groups are able to access the information and care they require. For CALD communities this comes with an obligation to work in partnership with communities to decide how to best communicate health messages that people respond to,” Ms Wells said.

The RACGP, CHF and FECCA say the barriers to care for CALD patients need to be addressed and are calling for:

- consultation with CALD communities – health authorities must involve communities and peak bodies in developing strategies to address the health needs of CALD Australians during the COVID-19 pandemic
- CALD community education campaigns on accessing GP care including support for using telehealth and the Australian Government’s free Translation and Interpreting Service (TIS)
- CALD peak bodies and community groups must be involved in developing and disseminating COVID-19 information and directives. More targeted information is needed about testing, self-isolation, contact tracing and healthcare for those who have tested positive.
- care and support of COVID-19 positive patients should involve CALD communities remotely if possible
- improved video consultation access – there is currently no video consultation platform available that enables the use of interpreters. We encourage video platforms to enable easy integration of telephone interpreters, simplify the interface and provide information on alternative telephone options.

Important information for CALD patients:

- take care of your health – don’t delay care, call your GP for any concerns
- you can consult your GP remotely – telephone and video consultations are available, subsidised for all concession card holders, those under 16 and patients and those who are more vulnerable to COVID-19
- free interpreter services are available for telephone consultations, via the Australian Government’s Translation and Interpreting Service (TIS) Ph 131450
- it is safe to visit your GP if you need to – practices have strict infection control measures, including sanitisation, social distancing and personal protective equipment
- if you have COVID-19 symptoms (cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, runny nose, fever or chills or loss of smell or taste) get tested right away and self-isolate until you get the results.

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