

25 March 2021

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister of Australia

Dear Prime Minister

Re: Calling for COVID-19 MBS telehealth to be extended to the end of 2021

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) welcomes your [announcement on Sunday 14 March](#) that telehealth will become a permanent part of the Australian Medicare system, and appreciate that this will be planned with peak medical groups. However, we have significant concerns that COVID-19 telehealth item numbers are to be extended only to the end of June 2021.

The RANZCP commends the Government's investment in mental health supports for the community during this challenging period and urges for COVID-19 telehealth item numbers to be extended at least to the end of 2021, in line with the national COVID-19 health response and suppression strategy.

The purpose of the COVID-19 telehealth item numbers is to increase people's access to psychiatry during the COVID-19 pandemic. The benefits of telehealth, via either video or telephone, include:

- Access for any new and existing patients who have developed an increased need for psychiatric services due to increased stresses caused by the pandemic and/or reduced access to usual social supports.
- Enhanced access to psychiatric services for many patients who are more vulnerable or had difficulty attending face to face appointments.

The RANZCP has recently partnered with Lived Experience Australia to survey consumers and carers, with the findings indicating that experiences of telehealth in psychiatry are overwhelmingly positive. Prior to this the [RANZCP surveyed over 1000 psychiatrist members \(2020\)](#) with the findings indicating the expansion of telehealth in psychiatry is essential to maintaining increased access for patients who are vulnerable as a result of the broad ranging effects of COVID; engaging with hard-to-reach-patients and in reducing travel and wait times; as well as a solution to difficulties leaving the house or work due to mobility, transport or psychological barriers. It is important to note that these effects on mental health and wellbeing will extend well beyond the immediate time of crisis.

Therefore, the RANZCP recommends that the current COVID-19 telehealth item numbers, as well as all other existing items for telehealth in psychiatry, must remain in place until at least the end of 2021. This would enable ongoing demand to be met whilst the pandemic resolves and the vaccination program is implemented.

These are unprecedented times and the Government's continued investment in mental health through telehealth can go a long way in keeping our communities safe and productive.

I wish to assure that the RANZCP is available to assist in every way to ensure that community needs continue to be met via COVID-19 MBS telehealth and welcomes discussion as to how this can be achieved. I look forward to the RANZCP being of assistance and can be contacted via Ms Bronwen Evans, Manager, Stakeholder Relations via Bronwen.evans@ranzcp.org or by phone on (03) 9601 4959.

Yours sincerely



Associate Professor John Allan
President

Ref: 2200

cc: The Hon Greg Hunt, MP, Minister for Health
The Hon David Coleman MP, Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention
The Hon Josh Frydenberg MP, Treasurer
A/Prof Ruth Vine, Deputy Chief Medical Officer for Mental Health