

**The Hon Peter Dutton MP Minister for Health**

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**The Health Care Consumers' Association (HCCA)** provides a voice for consumers on local health issues and now provides opportunities for health care consumers in the ACT to participate in all levels of health service planning, policy development and decision making. HCCA involves consumers through consumer representation, consultations, community forums, and information sessions about health services and conduct training for consumers in health rights and navigating the health system.

HCCA welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the **Review into After Hours Primary Health Care Services**. Our response is informed by consumer consultation for two recent bodies of work: our response to the Senate Inquiry into Out-of-Pocket Costs and a recent project with ACT Medicare Local, completing a comprehensive needs assessment for the Canberra community. Quotes after used throughout this submission from consumers highlight key issues.

### **General Comments**

There are several barriers that prevent access to and use of after-hours health care services in the ACT<sup>1</sup>. The key barriers identified by our membership and the ACT community are;

1. lack of awareness of services available,
2. out-of-pocket cost
3. lack of use & access to interpreter services.
4. limited range of after-hours services available

#### **1. Lack of awareness and understanding of after-hours options: Knowing your options**

Lack of awareness and understanding of after-hours services is a major issue for many consumers in the ACT. Many consumers do not have an understanding of the scope and nature of after-hours services, particularly in the Multicultural community within the ACT.

*"I don't know about the after-hours health care options and don't know about the next door Tuggeranong Community Health Centre. I wish I had this information when I just arrived here". – HCCA information session on After-Hours options*

HCCA partnered with ACT Medicare Local to run community information sessions on after-hours options. After these sessions many stated that they felt better informed about where to go if they get sick after-hours.

*"My son is asthmatic and I'm are very glad to be better informed about our health care options at night, which is usually when my son gets sicker" – HCCA information session on After-Hours options*

In this training HCCA used [infographics and diagrams showing where to go depending on their level of illness or injury](#). Translating the graph into other languages and provide phone numbers when applicable would be a useful tool for many consumers.

#### **2. Out-Of-Pocket Cost**

After-hours GP costs in the ACT are prohibitive, resulting in many consumers not being able to address their ill health, or forced to use an already over capacity emergency department for primary health

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<sup>1</sup> Health Care Consumers Association of the ACT (2014) *Primary health care in the ACT: Consumer experiences*. Available at <http://www.hcca.org.au/component/rsfiles/download?path=Out%20of%20Pocket%20Costs/Appendix%201%20HCCA%20Sub%20mission-%20Senate%20Inquiry%20into%20out-of-pocket%20health%20costs%20May%202014.pdf>

concerns. Lack of after-hours GP options was also an issue, with many people reporting that Canberra After-Hours Locum Medical Service (CALMs) charge around \$90 before the Medicare rebate, which is a large financial burden for many individual consumers. This cost is prohibitive, meaning a lack of access to after-hours care. CALMs does not clearly make public its fee structure, meaning consumers cannot make an informed financial choice in identifying after-hours options.

*“If I get sick after 5pm, or on weekend in the afternoon, I really have to think, do I want to choose between spending my pension money on food or seeing a GP I don’t know or trust? Then I think ‘Am I sick enough to go to ED?’” – Consumer from HCCA out-of-pocket cost consultation, 2014.*

If people do not have the money to access after-hours services they go to the Emergency Department at the Public Hospitals. In Canberra many consumers use nurse led Walk-in Centres, however many are not aware of the Centres’ function or hours, highlighting the need for more information on opening hours as well as the scope of services.

### **3. Interpreter services**

Many multicultural groups state that navigating the health care system in Canberra is often daunting and that it isn’t made clear what services are available and when to use them.

*“There are new migrants arriving all the time in Canberra and there is no one providing this sort of information to new arrivals”. - Father from Multicultural Play Group HCCA information session on After-Hours options*

Most people attending the sessions said they prefer to use interpreters when they visit their doctors. One mother said, that in one occasion it was the doctor who got the interpreter because he wanted to make sure she understood everything that was happening with her health. Others mentioned that they usually don’t ask for an interpreter because their partners speak for them. Which can be problematic for some consumers.

### **4. limited range of after-hours services available**

For consumers, a having a variety of after - hours services is preferable to one after-hours provider having a monopoly. A range of after-hours services provided by GP and allied health practitioners should be supported and encouraged to expand within the ACT region, stressing that these services need to be of high quality and meet the needs of the local community.

#### **After – Hours GP Hotline**

Whilst most consumers are aware of this service many state that they feel misled as they believe they will be speaking to a doctor rather than a nurse-led triage system. A lot of consumers also express frustration with the triage process which often feels to them like a checklist and can often be quite alarming.

*“[healthdirect is] sometimes useful although the nurses seemed to play it safe in recommending further medical attention, which was a little alarmist.” (Playgroups ACT survey respondent)”*

CALD consumers often said that when they attempt to use Healthdirect through the TIS, they are kept waiting for half-an-hour before an interpreter is available.

### **Further Recommendations**

Several suggestions and future recommendations from consumers:

- More promotion of Healthdirect and free phone calls from mobile phones;
- More community information sessions about after-hours primary care services;
- Publish more brochures in community languages about after-hours services;
- Consumers want a walk-in clinic option to see a GP, without having to make an appointment so people can be seen quickly; and
- Further promotion of the National Health Services Directory

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