

Medicare heart checks a healthy step

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Heart disease is a huge and often unrecognised problem for many Australians, and it is good news that both sides of politics today have announced their support for a comprehensive heart health check to be financed by Medicare.

“Even though there is one case of heart attack or stroke occurring in Australia every five minutes according to government figures, too many Australians don’t realise the importance of checking how their heart is performing. This check should nudge more patients and their doctors to make that check,” the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

“Labor has announced that in government it would spend \$170 million on a new Medicare item for comprehensive heart health checks to support doctors in better preventing, detecting and managing heart disease.

“And from April 1 this year, the Health Minister, Greg Hunt, has announced there will be a dedicated Medicare item to support GPs to assess cardiovascular risk.

“We also need to do much more in the way of preventive health measures to educate people and promote better diet and lifestyles to reduce obesity and other chronic illnesses that increase the risk of heart disease.

“The heart check plan is a good down payment in the wider investment we need in prevention. It should also provide a platform for more announcements to come about supporting general practice to better prevent and manage chronic disease in enrolled patients. We will be watching the development of those approaches with much interest.

“The suggestion that this heart health check be part of a Medicare-funded comprehensive health check for other lifestyle risk factors should be embedded in the Health Care Home enrolment model making the most of general practitioners as the accessible, appropriate and trusted setting for preventive health care.

“However, we need to acknowledge that a new Medicare item number is not an end in itself. Such a development needs to be accompanied by a package of wider reforms that include patient supports such as self-management programs, access to health coaching and

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use of patient activation measures by GPs so they better understand the likelihood that patients are receptive to and will follow up on lifestyle advice.

“In our Federal Budget submission, we called for more support for patients to take an active and engaged interest in their health care and support for doctors to encourage that engagement. The Consumers Health Forum will be reinforcing those calls in our soon-to-be released election priorities,” Ms Wells said.

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