

Nurses to do more GP work: Abbott

Patricia Karvelas and Adam Cresswell 11 Apr 06

MEDICARE will be widened to allow nurses to do more work traditionally done by GPs under plans being developed by Health Minister Tony Abbott to solve the nation's health workforce crisis.

It means the existing \$10.40 Medicare rebate, which at present can only be claimed when nurses carry out immunisations and wound management on behalf of a GP, could be claimed for a wider range of services to patients.

The Government has not decided what these extra services might be, but potentially they could include assessing the lung function of patients with asthma and the blood glucose level for patients with diabetes.

Other options include funding nurses under Medicare to visit patients in their own homes to assess whether the case is an emergency requiring an ambulance or a GP visit.

Nurses could also provide a wide range of medical advice, such as helping new mothers with breastfeeding, advising how to get young babies to sleep, and behaviour advice such as handling tantrums in young children.

Mr Abbott told The Australian widening the scope of practice for nurses was one way of using the entire health workforce more effectively.

Mr Abbott has visited hospitals and GP clinics on his way from Brisbane to Sydney on a charity bike ride and says nurses could be the solution to the lack of doctors available across the nation.

"The big issue is making better use of the entire workforce," Mr Abbott said. "There are certain issues at the moment with using nurses. The MBS rebate for nurse services is quite restricted, now some people are making better use of their nurses by the doctor staffing consultation, claiming the rebate and then having the nurses finish the consultation."

Following announcements that mental health nurses would be allowed to work out of GP clinics, Mr Abbott said he did not want to see such arrangements restricted to mental health.

"If we are going to make more use of mental health nurses, then surely we should make better use of nurses generally."

He said there were many qualified nurses who were not practising and they could be attracted back to the health system if they were given greater responsibilities.

"At the moment, immunisations and wound managements are the only thing that a nurse can do in general practice, which is rebateable without any further involvement from the doctor," Mr Abbott said.

"The nurse rebate could potentially cover a much wider range of consultation activities than it currently does. There is great scope for widening the range of consultations that could be covered by the practice nurse rebate."

Mr Abbott said that simply training more doctors would not end the health workforce crisis alone.

"We've got plenty of nurses, it's just that we don't have enough nurses who want to work as nurses. The more you broaden the kind of occupations where nurses can work, the more likely it is that people with nursing qualifications will want to stay in nursing."

The Australian Medical Association backs the widening of practice nurse roles. But the chairman of the AMA's council of general practice, Rod Pearce, said there should be a single open-ended Medicare item, rather than many specific items, so the GP was able to assess the nurse's training for themselves, and the GP, rather than Medicare, would decide what the nurse was capable of doing.

"Specific item numbers (for Medicare rebates) restrict the opportunities for nurses working in general practice rather than enhance them," Dr Pearce said.