

Family doctors: the heart of health

In this time of significant reform, what does the future hold for general practice? The chair of the federal AMA's Council of General Practice, **Dr Brian Morton**, discusses the challenges general practitioners are facing, the results of the AMA's specially commissioned poll of GPs and their patients, and what the AMA is doing to speak up for GPs and the vital role they play.



In my many conversations and meetings with general practitioners over the past few months it has become obvious that my colleagues

are very uneasy about the future of general practice and the Commonwealth Government's reform agenda. At the same time the vast majority of general practitioners are passionate about their vocation and deeply believe what they do is valuable and worthwhile.

The AMA has been working hard to represent the interests of general practitioners to the Commonwealth Government and has made some significant policy gains in recent times. However, more needs to be done to remind the decision-makers that general practice is the cornerstone of what is demonstrably one of the best primary healthcare systems in the world.

Recognising this need, the federal AMA established a GP Taskforce in November last year to develop a GP campaign in the lead-up to the federal election. To provide a sound basis for this campaign an independent company was commissioned to undertake research into the public's views of general practice and run focus groups of general practitioners to enable the AMA to gain a better understanding of their concerns and views.

What does the public think?

This special feature reports in detail on the fascinating results of the research. You will be pleased to read that the outcomes of the public polling are very positive. While details are provided on the following pages, some key points include:

- 88 per cent of patients are very satisfied/satisfied with the medical care they receive.
- 84 per cent agree with the view that every Australian should be able to see a GP of their choice and only doctors are trained to manage a wide variety of issues.

- 86 per cent of patients agree it is important to have a usual family doctor they know and trust.

Interestingly, when asked to rate a range of health professionals for knowledge, experience and trustworthiness, the public rated the "family doctor" as easily the highest, even higher than the "general practitioner". It may seem to you and me that there is no difference between a family doctor and a general practitioner but the question was deliberately phrased in a way to test what description resonates most with the public.

Another fascinating finding is that the public very clearly understands only doctors are trained to diagnose and treat the full range of illnesses. The survey shows the public have a great deal of respect and affection for nurses and want to see more government funding for nurses in primary care. However, the public also has strong views that nurses should be working with doctors rather than independently.

Almost all members of the public have more than one general practitioner – ie they have a trusted family doctor but also visit clinics and see any available doctor. The research clearly shows that Australian mothers (it is clear that it is mothers rather than fathers) self-diagnose to the extent that they will visit their trusted family doctor when they perceive that the issue is important but will visit a "convenience" GP (a clinic or a GP who is closer) for matters they perceive to be minor.

The message of this research is clear – Australians will not support any government policy that threatens the right of every family to visit their trusted family doctor whenever they need to.

What do GPs think?

Following the completion of the public polling the independent researchers undertook in-depth discussion with 81 general practitioners, selected on the basis of achieving a spread across



age, location, type of practice and AMA membership/non-membership. The research took the form of online focus groups, telephone interviews and survey questions. While the results of the research are detailed on the following pages the key themes are:

- General practitioners are overwhelmingly positive about choosing to be a general practitioner but are very concerned the system penalises them financially for providing quality patient care.
- They feel general practice has been devalued in the eyes of the government, the public and their specialist colleagues.
- They are very concerned about the loss of continuity of care for patients.
- They want Medicare to be simplified and red tape reduced.
- General practitioners value and want a strong role for nurses to work with them in general practice.

What is the AMA doing?

The AMA will campaign on behalf of GPs between now and the federal election along the theme "Support Family Doctors". The campaign will involve a campaign website where general practitioners and the public can register their support and express their views, material for you to distribute to your patients to enlist their support, ►

email campaigns directed at local MPs, and opportunities to meet MPs face-to-face.

We will continue to lobby the Commonwealth Government to ensure the voices of GPs are heard at the highest level. During the term of this Government we have strongly influenced policy changes affecting general practitioners including:

- A proposal to give midwives and nurse practitioners access to the MBS and PBS has been significantly amended so access is now dependent on mandatory collaborative arrangements with medical practitioners.
- Proposed legislation giving Medicare auditors unrestricted access to patient records was amended following AMA lobbying so only medical practitioners can access clinical information.
- Following representations by the AMA, the Government has announced significant increases in the number of GP training places.

As part of the "Support Family Doctors" campaign we will lobby on behalf of general practitioners and their patients in five key areas:

- 1. Choice of doctor** – Maintenance of the right of all Australians to choose and see their own family doctor.
- 2. More time to spend with patients** – improved MBS arrangements to support a broader range of work to be undertaken by GP practice nurses and allied health workers.
- 3. More practice nurses** – Funding for 1,300 more practice nurses/allied health workers to support general practitioners by 2011/2012.
- 4. Support for infrastructure** – \$830 million is needed over the next three years to kick-start the facilities required to teach and train and provide comprehensive multidisciplinary care through general practice.
- 5. MBS simplification** – Review and simplification of Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) GP items to enable patients to receive rebates appropriate

to, and reflective of, the high quality acute care, complex care, chronic disease management and preventive care provided in general practice.

What can you do to help?

- Go to www.supportfamilydoctors.com.au to register your support for the campaign and provide your views.
- Organise a meeting of your local general practitioners to discuss the campaign and invite the AMA to attend.
- Respond to requests for your participation as the campaign unfolds (eg send an email to your local MP).
- Encourage your colleagues to join the AMA and support the campaign to support family doctors.

Dr Brian Morton is chair of the federal AMA's Council of General Practice and deputy chair of the AMA's national GP Taskforce. This article was first published in NSW Doctor.

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