



No. 38: Optimising health care through specialist referral reforms

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The specialist referral system is a key operational component of the Australian health system. It is designed to manage access to subsidised specialist services and remunerate MBS Providers at referred service rates. It is also designed to affirm the central role of primary healthcare services. The regulatory requirement for consumers to obtain repeat referrals when already under the care of a specialist has received limited scrutiny since the 1970s.

Bringing the referral rules in line with contemporary health needs and service structures will require a well-co-ordinated, effective and efficient referral system that facilitates the evidence based and linear transfer of care from one clinician to another within a highly interoperable and collaborative healthcare system.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to support improvements in the Australian referral framework:

- Implement a national strategy for capturing and reporting standardised referral-related metrics.
- Conduct an independent, evidence-based review of the referral system.
- Decouple specialist billing from referral status and introduce protections against increased costs for patients under long-term specialist care.
- Optimise the health workforce by expanding referral rights and adopting a linear evidence-based model of patient transfer through the health system.
- Establish a dedicated principles and rules function within the Department of Health to support the interpretation, implementation and routine revision of referral rules.
- Invest in health system interoperability and mandate real-time health information exchange between multidisciplinary care teams to facilitate high quality, coordinated and continuous care.