



MBS Review – Report from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Reference Group

June 2019

The Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) is the national association of the dietetic profession with over 7000 members and branches in each state and territory. DAA is a leader in nutrition and advocates for food and nutrition for healthier people and healthier communities. DAA appreciates the opportunity to respond to the *Report from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Reference Group* as part of the Medicare Benefit Schedule Taskforce Review.

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DAA interest in this review

As the peak body for the dietetic profession, the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) has an interest in the health and wellbeing of all Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience inequities in health and generally suffer from poorer nutritional status compared to other Australians.¹ Data from the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (2012-13) highlighted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people consumed less fruit and vegetables and had a greater proportion of discretionary foods in the diet (foods high in saturated fat, sugar, salt) compared to non-Indigenous.² In addition, over 20% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, compared to less than 4% in non-Indigenous populations were living in a household where someone went without food when the household ran out of food.² DAA recognise this significant concern and support interventions to reduce the health inequalities experienced by this population, including provision of appropriate MBS items.

Access to healthy food and nutrition care are significant factors in improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Improved access to nutrition and dietetic services, supported by Medicare will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people improve their nutrition and overall health. The Accredited Practising Dietitian program administered by DAA is the platform for self-regulation of the dietetic profession and provides an assurance of quality and safety to the public. Accredited Practising Dietitians are food and nutrition experts who translate the science of nutrition into practical solutions for healthy living. Accredited Practising Dietitians have an important role in providing culturally appropriate, medical nutrition therapy to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

Key Messages

Overall DAA is supportive of the proposed recommendations. DAA is particularly supportive of the recommendations to increase the number of allied health sessions, incentivise bulk billing, reduce administrative burden and to allow items to cover both individual and group sessions.

DAA supports recommendations to promote culturally safe health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples amongst all health providers.

Discussion

Recommendation 1: Bulk-billing incentives for allied health appointments

DAA is supportive of the recommendation to introduce bulk-billing incentives for allied health services. Provision of adequate financial incentives for health professionals to provide bulk billing services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health people would improve affordability and access to much needed allied health care. It is imperative that the incentive provides an adequate financial reimbursement to the health professional for their expertise to support sustainable high-quality practice and continuing service to the community.

Recommendation 2: Enable all allied health services available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be provided as group sessions.

As per Recommendation 4 in the Allied Health Reference Group report, DAA supports that allied health services should be available as an individual consult or as a group session. Group sessions have benefits from a cultural perspective and in provision of peer support. The low uptake of group services at present is potentially related to high overhead costs. Consequently, professionals providing group services should receive financial incentives to address the feasibility of delivering group items.

Recommendation 4: Pool access to allied health items that are available following the completion of a health assessment and the creation of a GPMP/TCA.

DAA supports this recommendation to pool access to the allied health items. The current process acts as a barrier, primarily due to the high administrative burden. Pooling the access to the allied health items will reduce the complexity and administrative burden and enhance the experience for both the allied health professional and the individual in using the allied health items.

Recommendation 5: Increase the annual number of allied health sessions available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

DAA agree with increasing the number of allied health sessions available annually for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, given the complex health needs of many people and the need for more frequent, longer sessions with allied health professionals.

Accredited Practising Dietitians play an important role in supporting behaviour change in relation to nutrition to improve nutritional intake in the treatment of chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and arthritis. A 2017 systematic review of dietetic interventions in primary care found that there is fair evidence to support that dietetic interventions improve dietary intake, weight loss outcomes and diabetes clinical measures.³ Dietary interventions are not only effective but also relatively low cost and safe.

Given the role of allied health, in particular dietetics, DAA is supportive of increasing the number of allied health sessions proposed in the recommendations. These will enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to receive adequate allied health care to improve their health, supported by Medicare. DAA wishes to highlight that adequate remuneration of the allied health professional for the sessions is required.

Recommendation 7: Ensure that health assessment templates and content reflect best practice.

Recommendation 8: Update the allied health referral form for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health assessment

DAA is supportive of ensuring templates reflect best practice and that the allied health referral form is updated as proposed. This will streamline processes for both health professionals and patients and ensure enhanced communication.

Aboriginal health workers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professionals without formal registration bodies for the MBS.

Dietitians respect the vital role Aboriginal Health Workers play providing care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and in supporting other health professionals. DAA support enhancing the Aboriginal Health Worker workforce (recommendation 12) and appropriate remuneration for this profession. DAA considers that greater investment is needed in the development of the role of Aboriginal Health Workers along with more effective integration within the care team.

DAA recognise the importance of culturally safe practice and community governance of health and acknowledge that there are other forms of health outside of the traditional health paradigm that offer benefit amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Recommendation 16: Enhance social and emotional well-being support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through an MBS rebate for social and emotional well-being support services delivered by accredited practitioners.

DAA supports this recommendation given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience disproportionately high rates of mental health conditions. A clear link has been established between physical and mental health. DAA highlight that nutrition, physical activity and healthy lifestyles play an important role in the prevention and management of mental health conditions. DAA have provided an extensive response on this as part of the Mental Health Reference Group MBS Review.

Recommendation 17: Promote culturally safe health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to all health providers

DAA supports the provision of culturally safe health services and urges the Government to invest in this. Providing guidance on what culturally safe health services looks like is critical. All health professionals need to undergo adequate training and be engaged in improving the culturally appropriate care provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal community-controlled health services and Aboriginal Health Workers play integral roles in the provision of culturally safe health services.

To ensure culturally safe health services, it is important that there is community input into the development of programs and services. The benefit of community contributions to the development of health programs has been demonstrated in nutrition. A 2019 systematic review assessed the effect of nutritional interventions in Australian based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁴ A number of studies included in the review observed improvements in dietary quality and positive health outcomes across a range of factors such as biochemistry measures following nutrition education and promotion programs.⁴ This review, along with a 2017 narrative review on food and nutrition programs highlight that for programs to be successful community involvement is critical.^{4,5}

References

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