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Better access to after hours services signals arrival of PHCOs

Families will have better access to General Practitioners (GPs) at times of urgent need with the extra \$126 million announced in the Federal Budget for after hours services, Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) Chair Dr Emil Djakic said today.

"The new GP after hours program signals the arrival of primary health care organisations (PHCOs) on the Australian health scene," Dr Djakic said.

The program gives PHCOs the opportunity to design services that meet the needs of their local communities by facilitating after hours services which best suit their local area.

"This is an excellent example of the types of benefits which will flow to the community from the establishment of PHCOs, evolving from the existing General Practice Network.

"Patients need GPs at all hours, but not all GPs offer the service. But many would be willing to go on an on-call GP roster or be contracted by a PHCO to offer after hours services. At the moment service provision is not well organised across the country – a regional, organised approach will mean patients have access, and GPs have breaks," Dr Djakic said.

Dr Djakic said the best arrangement for after hours services was for the payments to follow where the care is provided.

"The current Practice Incentive Payments for after hours services are poorly targeted and are not used consistently across general practice," Dr Djakic said.

"The new arrangements will mean that funding will go directly to those general practices meeting the needs of the community, and that's the best system possible for GPs and their patients.

"We know that rural and remote GPs tend to be on call seven days a week, 24 hours a day. I expect PHCOs will enter into funding arrangements which support the provision of that service.

Many general practice networks already provide after hours services, and after hours funding will make these available to more communities.

"These flexible funding arrangements will enable PHCOs to look at innovative models such as managing rosters for particular areas, or establishing and running after hours clinics, in association with – or indeed even within – local hospitals."

Dr Djakic welcomed the decision to ensure strong links between Health Direct – the national call centre – and PHCOs.

"International evidence shows that call centres work best when they are integrated with local service providers – with GPs.

"We're delighted Health Connect will work with PHCOs to ensure Health Connect is integrated with local after hours services as they are developed, organised and funded by the PHCOs," he said.

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