Joint Community Sector Statement on Health

We, community sector organisations with a specific interest in the health outcomes of Australia, have joined together to express our deep concern about proposals that are currently being considered in the Australian Parliament which will fundamentally impact the ability of people to access affordable healthcare.

Australia enjoys some of the best health outcomes in the world. As a nation, we live longer and better than most communities around the world. Our current expenditure in health is modest in relation to OECD standards and we are rightly proud of a system that aims to guarantee access for essential health services to everyone, regardless of how much money is in their pockets.

We are aware that our health needs are changing. Our longer life expectancy means that we are likely to need health services for longer, and that these services are different to those we needed 30 years ago when Medicare was introduced. There are communities that do not share good health outcomes, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We recognize the relationship between the health of individuals and other social influences such as housing, nutrition, education and employment to name just a few. The increasing burden of chronic and lifestyle diseases means that we need to look for new solutions, and it is right to consider health funding and financing.

The Government has signaled their concern regarding the long term sustainability of the health care system. We acknowledge that health is one of largest expenditure areas for the Federal Government and there are opportunities to make the health system more effective and efficient. However, changes to the system must preserve the core of our health system, the centrepoint of which Australians are justifiably proud, namely that access to health care remains universal and free.

We are willing, able and keen to contribute to this discussion, and to work with Government and the community to identify ways to improve our health system, and ensure that all members of the community continue to have access to services when they need them in order to enjoy good health.

As the Federal Parliament considers a range of new health funding measures, we urge them to look at the evidence base regarding how best to reform the health system, rather than looking for easy short-term fixes that will in fact cost more for individuals, the Government and the community as a whole in the long run.

We urge the Government, and Parliamentarians who are currently participating in inquiries, considering Senate reports and considering proposed budget measures to:
+ **REJECT the introduction of any new mandatory healthcare co-payments and the increase of any current healthcare co-payments, particularly in the area of primary health.** The Parliament should reject any GP co-payment given that even a system with exemptions will result in people delaying seeking care due to their capacity to pay a co-payment, and will have most impact on those who are already disadvantaged – the poor, the sick, the old and the young. A GP co-payment and a rise in the cost of accessing PBS medicines will set back the efforts to close the gap of life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and see those with high health needs, including those with mental illness not accessing the health care they need when they need and when it can be most effective. Consumer co-payments in primary health limit access, and have a disproportionate impact on those who are poor, sick, disadvantaged and vulnerable.

+ **RECOMMIT to the funding of health promotion, and health programs that target early intervention and prevention.** These investments will pay off in the long term and ensure that we maintain health and wellbeing across the community.

+ **REVERSE decisions that have seen a reduction in spending in the health budget in real terms.** There is a need to acknowledge that changes in indexation methodology will see a reduction in health spending, particularly in the acute healthcare sector. Funding in this area needs to be based on performance and need.

We call on decision makers to ensure that any decisions that are made in relation to funding in healthcare are tested against the principles of:

+ **ADEQUACY** – ensuring that health services across the continuum are available to the people that need them and particular at-risk groups in the community are provided with the services they need to live healthy and productive lives.

+ **ACCESSIBILITY** – ensuring that people are not in the position of having to ration their use of health services, and delay the care they need. In this we urge the maintenance of a commitment to universality in the provision of essential healthcare.

+ **ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY** – ensuring that healthcare services are respected as a community asset, and vested interests are not able to access public funds to provide healthcare services without adequate accountability back to the Government and community. Health services need to be connected to the community they serve, and we need to ensure that patients are at the center of their health care decisions.

+ **EVIDENCE BASED AND BASED ON AN INVESTMENT PARADIGM** – the health of individuals is the foundation for healthy families and communities, and a productive and prosperous
economy. Health expenditure is an investment in our community. Health programs that are based on evidence, especially those that take a preventative and early intervention approach, are the best investments our Government can make. There are opportunities to save the 30% of health expenditure that is currently estimated to be lost in waste, and opportunities to invest earlier to ensure that people stay well and live longer.

The Parliament and the community is being asked to consider fundamental choices about how we fund health services in the future and how accessible these will be for everyone in the community moving forward. We urge our elected leaders to make decisions that take into account the impact on everyone’s health, but particularly those most vulnerable and disadvantaged. It is imperative that Parliamentarians listen to the community’s views on health funding now and in the future.

We invite the Government and Parliament to partner with the community sector and other key sectors, so that together we can identify the ways to increase efficiency, increase effectiveness, secure sustainability and improve the health outcomes for everyone in the community.

SIGNED BY:

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