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Telehealth expansion welcomed by rural health peak body

18 September 2020

The National Rural Health Alliance, the peak body for rural health in Australia, welcomed the Australian Government's expansion of Medicare rebates for telehealth consultations until 31 March 2021.

The Medicare rebates, which were brought in to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, were due to expire on 30 September.

"Telehealth has been an important lifeline for people in rural, regional and remote Australia during the pandemic," said National Rural Health Alliance CEO Dr Gabrielle O'Kane.

"It can be difficult enough to access health care in some areas at the best of times, but especially once you add in the difficulties caused by the pandemic including border restrictions.

"Telehealth is vital to ensuring rural people can keep up their regular health checks during COVID-19 and ensure continuity of care."

The Alliance said that the Government should also be addressing some ongoing issues with telehealth if it was here to stay.

"Connectivity remains a big issue in rural Australia, and we need to be improving internet infrastructure in the bush otherwise telehealth is difficult or impossible for patients and health practitioners to use," said Dr O'Kane.

"We also need safeguards to ensure that telehealth is being delivered by local practitioners, and not online-only outfits based in the major cities who offer no face-to-face services."

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The National Rural Health Alliance is Australia's peak non-government organisation for rural and remote health.