

## **At-risk cancer patients to be hit hard by cuts to Telehealth phone call rebates due on January 01, 2022**

Australian Cancer patients be amongst those to bear the brunt of the axing of vital Medicare rebates for phone calls with their specialists. Those most negatively impacted will be elderly patients, regional and rural patients, those without stable internet, unable to manage video calls, and whom should not be venturing into hospitals and medical centres at a time of surging COVID-19.

The nation's peak body of cancer specialists has expressed grave concerns about the potentially devastating consequences for some of Australia's most vulnerable patients of the proposed changes to the Telehealth rebates. These changes will see funding for telephone appointments cut drastically.

The President of the Private Cancer Physicians of Australia (PCPA), Dr Christopher Steer, said private cancer specialists were given only [8 working days' notice](#) (over the Christmas and New Year period) about the changes to their patients' access to subsidised phone call consultations, that start on January 01, 2022.

"We are very supportive of Telehealth, particularly during this pandemic and making it permanent is a welcome decision but then the fine print was only revealed days before Christmas," Dr Steer said. A Medicare rebate (item number 91835) for phone calls will be scrapped along with a 50% loading (item number 112) for video consultations for regional and rural patients.

The PCPA has called on the Government to defer this dramatic change for at least six months, so immunocompromised patients will not be forced to leave the safety of their homes for a consultation with their specialist, at a time when COVID-19 is escalating again.

"The impact of the significantly increased out-of-pocket costs on patients, already struggling with the financial toxicity of their cancer journey, also needs to be determined *before* these changes are imposed," Dr Steer said. "Many specialists, like myself, prefer video or face-to-face but for many of our patients, especially now, as we experience another wave of COVID-19; neither are an option,"

Cancer patient advocacy groups and oncologists are only now realising what these changes could mean for their patients. The CEO of [Pink Hope](#), Ms Sarah Powell, said she was incredulous over the shock changes, especially given the surge in COVID-19.

"Regional and remote cancer patients will be hard hit by this. Too many simply can't use video due to reasons beyond their control and they should not, must not, be forced to travel into public spaces, where COVID-19 could be rampant," Ms Powell said. "We must defer these changes before they have a catastrophic impact on those who are already doing it tough."

Hunter Valley haematologist, Dr Wojt Janowski, said he was extremely disappointed by the unexpected changes.

"It is with a heavy heart that I will no longer offer Telehealth and I will be withdrawing from great initiatives like [Telehealth 4 the Bush](#).

With the removal of the phone items for initial and standard consults, we are now penalising patients for having poor internet connections, older telephones, living remotely, and being older," Dr Janowski said. "It is such a shame. Telehealth had been such a lifesaving initiative throughout the pandemic."  
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NB *Dr Steer is a practicing regional based oncologist and may not be available at all times*

### **About Us**

The [Private Cancer Physicians of Australia \(PCPA\)](#) is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to the improvement of the health system for all cancer patients, but particularly for private cancer patients in Australia.

Our mission is to promote and work towards a health system that provides high quality, fair, integrated cancer treatment